

## Summer 1985 by [luxuriousvoyage11](#)

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**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair/Max, Max & Lucas Sinclair

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**Summary:**

After an eventful few years of fighting monsters and surviving the Upside Down, Joyce and Chief Hopper treat the kids to a fun summer of camping. The campsite oozes with excitement, romance, and friendship as the fourteen-year-olds create sweet memories

# 1. The Car Ride

## Author's Note:

So this may be questionable, I'm not sure how to feel about it.

It's just a fluffy idea I've had in my head for a while and I'll see where it takes me!

It's also on Wattpad, [luxuriousvoyage111](#)

After a long ten months of their first year of high school, the boys, Max, and El were ready for their summer vacation. Will had asked them all back in December on their Christmas break if they wanted to go camping to a site four hours from Hawkins.

He used to go every summer with his mom and Jonathan and was now eager to bring his best friends. It's what got them through drama at school with new bullies, teachers not as kind and helpful as Mr. Clarke, and their tough AP classes.

As for El, she spent the year catching up on schoolwork with Hopper, her new dad. Her pronunciation and understanding of vocabulary had vastly improved since she was last in Hawkins, along with a basic understanding of the maths and sciences she'll need to catch up with her friends in school.

Nevertheless, the fourteen-year-olds deserved a fun and relaxing vacation. While Joyce and Hopper triple check the packed car, the kids excitedly babble over each other, despite the fact it's 6 am, and are already arguing over the seating arrangements for the long car ride.

"I am absolutely not sitting next to Dustin the whole time! He'll fart and then snore in my ear the whole damn time!" Lucas exclaimed, causing the group, including Dustin, to giggle.

"Oh get over it, you pansy", Dustin shot back, knowing well he just wanted to nap the entire time.

"Yeah really Lucas, don't be such a baby" Max added on, smirking.

She had grown very close to the boys, though Lucas a bit more than the rest. She loved bonding with Eleven, being the only two girls surrounded by nerdy teenage boys 24/7, but she connected with Lucas the most.

Whether it was their personalities that seemed together perfectly, both head-strong and independent, or the fact they had the same sense of humor, she was grateful to have met him and his friends.

Hopper comes over, interrupting the children, "If you kids are gonna argue like this the whole time, I will leave you on the side of the road. We're all packed up, let's go."

Crammed in Hopper's van are Lucas, Max, and Dustin in the middle row with Will, Mike, and Eleven in the back. Dustin and Will were snoring within fifteen minutes of getting onto the highway while Lucas and Max were swapping the comic books they had brought for the trip.

Mike and El, ever since she got back, had been inseparable. It had been a long year for Mike Wheeler, but, as he looks down at El in the bumpy car, with the rock music station playing softly in the front, he knows that year of suffering wasn't anything compared to if he had never seen her again.

He was beyond grateful to have his girl back and vows to make sure nothing else happens to the pixie-haired girl staring out the window.

El feels his stare on her and turns around, looking up questioningly at him. "What?" she says, tilting her head to the side. Blushing at the fact he got caught, he gives her a soft smile and shakes his head, "nothing El, are you excited to go camping?"

With a huge smile and a twinkle in her eye, El nods her head "s'mores! Dustin told me all about them, he says they're his favorite. He thinks I might like them better than Eggos." Letting out a laugh, Mike puts his arm around her shoulder and excitedly rambles, "I don't know about that, but there's also other fun things we can do. Like start a fire and tell stories and oh, the sky is so clear at night so we'll be able to see hundreds of stars!"

Giggling at the messy-haired teen, she nods with a huge smile which vanishes when she lets out a big yawn.

"You tired El?" She sheepishly nods again, resting her head on Mike's shoulder. Mike kisses her temple and grabs a blanket he had put on the floor, laying it over both of their laps.

Probably from the years' she spent in a cold sterile lab, she's usually shivering with freezing hands. "Thank you, Mike" she mumbles, bringing her legs up to her chest and turning them to lightly lean on his side.

When El first got back, it took them a few months to sort out their awkward teenage feelings, but once it was out in the open, everything came natural to them - showing affection, conversing before fighting, like they (Mike) had when they were twelve and dealing with the Upside Down.

Now a kiss on the cheek or leaning on one another was the norm and expected out of the young teenagers. Mike tightens his hold on El and leans his head back, grateful for the time he'll be spending with his best friends.

Joyce turns around two hours into the trip, shocked by the quietness in the car. "Wow Hop, you really must've scared them with that threat of yours, they're all passed out" she smirks.

Shaking his head with a slight smile he warns, "It's never too late Joyce, looks like you'll be the one catchin' a ride from a trucker." Joyce lets out a quiet laugh, shaking her head at the smart-mouthed sheriff.

After the week he helped look for Will two years ago, he had grown incredibly close to Joyce and her family. He couldn't help but admire her strength, which is coincidentally what she admired in him. They shared a mutual love for one another that didn't have to be spoken or at least hasn't been yet.

After a particularly hard bump in the road, Lucas awoke and looked down to see Max sleeping peacefully on his lap. Biting his lip, he knew he had to sort out his feelings.

On one side, he liked her and she was a good friend to him but on the other side was the scary and unknown part. He had never thought about dating a girl before. He knows he gives Mike a lot of crap when it comes to Eleven but knows, secretly, that's something he wants with someone.

With dating someone, though, comes vulnerability and he's not sure that's something he's ready to deal with. As the snoring from the spunky red-head breaks him out of his thoughts, he lets out a soft laugh and prays this trip with her and his friends gives him some clarity.

## 2. Matchmaker

Four hours later, and just barely ten in the morning, Joyce turns around to wake the kids while Hopper prepares to unload the truck

“We’re here kiddos” Joyce hums quietly, enjoying the silence while she still can. Lucas and Max are the first to wake, both with a blush on their cheeks from their unusually close proximity.

Leaning over Max to poke Dustin in the arm, Lucas roughly awakens the sleeping boy who will definitely have a sore neck for a few days.

“What? Five more minutes, stop it!” Dustin whines, causing a giggle to erupt from Max and Lucas to shake his head while trying to hide a smile. “No, you idiot! We’re here at the campsite, we gotta help Hopper before he starts to get all pissy.”

Sluggishly, Dustin gets up to slide the door open and stretches followed by Max and Lucas whose faces have finally gone back to normal.

Awoken by the car door, Will’s eyes peep open and excitement rushes through him as he sees the familiar surroundings of tall trees, rocks coating the river, and wooden picnic tables scattered across the dirt.

Jumping up and over El and Mike, hitting the brown-haired boy in the knee, he rushes out to see his friends struggling to help Hopper and Joyce get the tents and coolers of food.

Now awake, Mike rolls his neck side to side stretching the best he can while being confined by Eleven’s head on his chest and knees pressed against him.

After the year in the Upside Down, El occasionally spends nights being tormented all over again in her dreams. While Mike has never witnessed it, Will informed him before the trip and he’s already feeling guilty about waking her when she’s been at peace this whole time.

“Hey El, we’re here” he whispers softly. Only causing her to stir a

little further into his warm body, he lets out a laugh and taps her on top of the head.

“Sorry El, but you have to get up now. Everyone’s out of the car already.” Huffing, she pulls back and gives him a blank stare. “I’m sorry,” he says sheepishly, “it had to be done! Let’s go before they start yelling fo-“

“Are you guys serious, get out and help us!” Lucas screams from outside of the van, struggling to hold the large tent the four boys plan to sleep in. “Yeah, really! Eleven should be doing this shit with her mind.” Dustin barks out after, causing Mike to roll his eyes and give El a knowing look.

Smirking, she grabs his hand and leads them out giving everyone a shy wave.

Forty minutes later, after lots of bickering and no help from El’s powers, the three tents were up and ready to be slept in later that night; the boys in one tent, El and Max in another, and Joyce and Hopper in the last.

“So guys,” Max says as she plops down on a near-by picnic table, “what should we do?” Will, eager to start the day, lists off some activities him and Jonathan would always do when they came up.

“Well, there’s a nice trail to hike on since we’re well-rested if you guys want to do that. Or we can go swimming! We should probably do that later though. It might be too cold right now. Oh! Or we can-“

Cutting off his excitable friend, adventurous Lucas agrees that hiking sounds like a good plan causing everyone to nod eagerly and run towards the way of the trail. Will informs Joyce and Hopper that they’re going hiking and sprints to catch up to his friends.

“Please be careful, Will!” Joyce calls out after to her younger son, always reluctant to let him go off. Joyce looks over at Hop and sighs, biting her lip. “It’s been two years Hop and him going off still makes me so nervous.”

Hop looks assuringly at Joyce, inching closer to her. “Two years is

nothing compared to what happened Joyce. You and Will went through so much and, I say it all the time but, you're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for."

Joyce looks down at the dirt and lights the cigarette she pulled out of her back pocket. "Avoiding eye contact, you know better" Hopper says with a smirk.

Rolling her eyes playfully, she shakes her head and walks over to distract herself by organizing the outdoor games the boys had overflowed the trunk with.

"That's so irrelevant Lucas, shut up!" Dustin argues back, bickering with his friend about whether or not he could get the new cute tenth-grade girl to go on a date with him. "I don't see how us being total nerds isn't relevant! She'll be a pretty cheerleader in no time and won't even look your way."

Rolling her eyes, Max scoffs and side-eyes Lucas. "Oh don't listen to him Dustin!" the fiery red-head interjects, "you're super funny and sweet, she'd be stupid not to go out with you." Dustin gives a toothy grin to Max, turning his head slightly to give a smug look towards Lucas.

He may be the funny guy, but Dustin was just as perceptive as Lucas and Mike. He picked up on Mike's crush with Eleven right away, with his soft voice and pathetic love-sick eyes, and after meeting Max knew her and Lucas would connect in one way or another.

He didn't care too much about being single within the group, choosing to flirt and woo the cute older girls. What he did care about, however, was getting under Lucas's skin; which happened to work perfectly as he watched him stomp off towards Will, who was leading and taking the pictures he promised for Jonathan.

El, whose hands were intertwined and swinging with Mike's, watches the whole thing unfold and smirks. Looking up at Mike, she nudges his shoulder and bluntly states, "they like each other."

Letting out a snort, the taller boy looks down at her and raises an eyebrow, "you think? Are we gonna play matchmaker this entire



trip? Because that's how long it will take for Lucas to admit any sort of romantic feelings."

Puzzled by the unfamiliar word, she narrows her eyes causing her light brown eyebrows to scrunch. Picking up on it, Mike continues, "a matchmaker. Kind of like a real version of Cupid, remember, from Valentines Day?"

El nods, smiling as she thinks back to her and Mike's first holidays together.

Blushing at similar thoughts, Mike rambles, "yeah, well, if you think two people like each other, you can try to get them to admit to their feelings. If they both like each other, then you can plan a date for them."

El stays silent for a moment, processing this information. With a final nod, El says softly to Mike, "I'm going to do that and then we can plan a date for them. I think they would like that."

Kissing the top of her head, he mumbles against it, "That's nice of you El, I'm sure they would."

Their moment is interrupted by the madness that ensues for the rest of the hike. Up a few feet, Will trips over a rock while looking through his camera lens causing Dustin to fall over him and scrape up his knees on the harsh rocks and dirt.

"Oh great, the biggest one falls and none of you skinny assholes will be able to help, unless.... Eleven, would you like to make me fly?" he asks excitedly.

El raises her eyebrow and examines his cuts, deeming them unnecessary for telekinetic use; "you'll be fine. Are you okay Will?" she asks, softly. Giggling along with the rest at Dustin's blatant rejection, he nods and thanks her.

Camping the half hour back to their campground, the group reminisces about middle school sharing the details with Max about Mr. Clarke and reformed bully Troy.

When they return back, Hop notices Dustin's scraped knees and

shakes his head knowing something, of course, would've happened to the chipper teen. Joyce grabs Dustin and cleans his knees, making sure three times that he was okay.

While Dustin gets cleaned up, the kids grab the frisbee, corn-hole boards, and bean-bags, preparing the rest of their day for fun-filled games. Grabbing El, Max rushes over to one side and proclaims "girls vs boys! C'mon Joyce!"

Needless to say, even with the uneven amount, the ladies crushed the boy's team and celebrated their victory by basking in the sun while the boys prepared lunch.

### 3. I Do

The teens were tired out from their day of outdoor games and sports, all now sitting around the fire with Joyce and Hopper roasting hot dogs and trying to persuade the chief to play truth or dare.

“Oh c’mon Chief,” Max says playfully, “are you too scared to be dared by us?” Joining in, the other kids laugh and simultaneously start to make chicken noises. Hopper had remained stone-faced until then, laughing at the silliness of the situation.

He remembers the three boys being frightened by him at their school over two years ago and wouldn’t have believed he’d be in this current predicament.

“Okay okay, fine. Shut your beaks,” says Hopper, ignoring Joyce’s giggle, “give me the stupid dare.” Huddling in a circle, the kids whisper back and forth different dares before settling on Mike’s idea.

Turning around and staring the older man right in the eyes they exclaim “jump in the lake!”

Shaking his head immediately, Hopper argues “no way! It will be so cold!” Talking over each other, he hears shouts of

“chicken! baww, baww!”

“you have too! it’s a dare!

“it’s not even that cold.”

And if it weren’t for El’s constant state of observation, the excitable group would’ve missed the chief running towards the river in defeat.

Pulling on Mike’s sweater, she nods her head towards the river. Eyes wide with realization, the younger boy alerts his friends. “Guys, shut up! Look!”

Clapping and wooing, the group runs the several yards to the water in a fit of giddiness watching the chief do a cannonball off one of the higher rocks.

Swimming back the short distance to the dirt, the chief stares at the kids in mock disbelief. “It was cold Lucas! You should get in there and see for yourself!”

With the kids now running away from the soaking-wet man, Joyce greets him by his side with a couple of towels. “How was the dip Chief?” she asks.

“Wipe that smirk off your damn face Joyce, I just might throw you in there right now.” Laughing with him, she puts down a towel big enough for both of them to sit on and enjoy time by the water with no crazy kids.

“Guys! Let’s make s’mores now” an excitable Will announces. Running over to the bags of food, he pulls out a box of graham crackers along with packages of marshmallows and milk chocolate.

“Yes! I’ve been waiting for this moment my entire life!” Dustin exclaims, “come one, come all to learn how to make the perfect s’more.”

Rolling their eyes, Lucas and Mike sit on the other side of the fire denying the tutorial while El, Max, and Will sit around Dustin giggling at his descriptive yet helpful s’more lesson.

It was quickly halted, however, when Dustin and Will started to debate their opposing views of a lightly toasted marshmallow versus a burnt one.

“You are mental! What is the damn point of the marshmallow if it’s not burnt!” Dustin yells, truly outraged. “Well, it definitely shouldn’t be burnt!” Will calmly but firmly argues back, “it looks gross all charred like that and takes away from the chocolate!”

With them distracted, El looks over at Max and gives her a smile. “Oh no, what are you up too El?” Max asks, seeing a glint in the pixie-haired girl’s eye.

Leaning into her ear, El whispers “do you like Lucas?” Shocked and trying her best not to turn pink, the red-haired girl shouts “what is wrong with you! Of course not!”

Eyes wide and swallowing the lump that suddenly appeared in her throat, it takes El a second to process the response before she shakes her head and mumbles an apology.

Hearing Max's loud shout, Mike looks over in curiosity to see El with her head down and Max looking at her in disbelief. Getting up from the lawn chair, he walks over to see El now holding back tears.

Bending down, Mike places his hands on her knees, "El, hey, what's wrong?" Mike questions softly, a stark contrast to the angry look he shoots towards Max.

Embarrassed and feeling guilty by her reaction, she slowly walks away towards Dustin and Will.

"I....I just asked if she liked Lucas. To play matchmaker. Then she asked what was wrong with me. I didn't mean to upset her Mike, she's my only friend that's a girl."

Feeling a pain in his chest from guilt and sadness, he was quick to reassure her. "No no, it's okay El. Max isn't mad at you, I think she was just surprised you asked her that question."

Deeply breathing in and out a few times, a technique Will had taught her when she was feeling anxious or upset from a nightmare, she nods and rests her head between the crook of Mike's neck and shoulder.

This is a frequent position for El when she feels upset around Mike and, per routine, he starts to hum. It was a bit of a game they started, causing her to calm down and then slowly become able to guess the song.

After a minute of his humming, El quietly states with a smile "should I stay or should I go" with a smile.

"I knew you'd get that one," he mumbled, kissing the side of her head. "Let's go see what they're doing, okay? I promise it's all right."

Nodding her head, she picks it up while Mike stands up and holds his hand out for El to take.

Lucas joined Max, Dustin, and Will looking over to see Mike comforting El. "Ouch Max, you bullying one of our own now?" Red-faced and trying not to grow more upset, she punches his arm. "Shut up!" she spats.

Will, always the sensitive one, tries to keep the peace. "C'mon guys, it's alright. See, they're coming over."

Joined by the young couple, Max looks over and offers El an apologetic smile. Continuing their fun and easing the slight tension, Dustin tries, and fails, to tell a spooky ghost story which leaves the kids yawning just as Joyce meets them by the fire.

"It's eleven o'clock already guys," she states softly, "how about you get ready for bed?"

Nodding, the kids disperse towards their bags and take turns changing in separate tents. Kissing El goodnight, and reassuring her again that everything will be okay with Max, Mike makes his way towards his tent where the boys are already giggling and poking fun at his blushed face.

El unzips her tent to see Max wrapped up in her camouflage sleeping bag and nervously lays down a few feet away on the soft purple blanket Joyce had brought her.

Laying in the quiet for a few moments, Max was first to break the silence. "I'm sorry El," she says apologetically, "I didn't mean to yell at you and act like an asshole. I just...never had a girlfriend before. To talk about girl things with, ya know? I just wasn't sure how to respond."

Nodding her head, and then realizing she can't be seen, El opens her mouth, sweetly saying. "Neither have I, it's okay. We can learn together."

Enamored by her kindness, Max gets up and quickly hugs El. It had been so quick El hadn't been able to react, but it made her smile knowing tough girl Max just snuck in a hug.

Now lying in a more comfortable silence, with the tune of The Clash's

song still stuck in her head, she hears “I do by the way.”

Eyes wide and mouth turned up in a huge smile, she lets out a contagious giggle which leads Max to giggle and cover her face with her hands. Their giggles are interrupted by big yawns, a sign sleep is needed.

Before drifting to sleep, El vows to start on date ideas tomorrow and run them by Mike or Joyce to make sure her two friends have the best first date ever.

## 4. Confessions and Kayaking

It's nine thirty a.m. when Max and El's tent unzips, the two giggling girls stepping out with messy bed-hair.

"About time you ladies joined us" Hopper says jokingly while placing the second plate of bacon down, "maybe you can actually get a strip before these animals finish it in three-seconds."

Running over and grabbing four pieces of the fried food, one being right from Dustin's hands, Max plops down on the picnic table next to Joyce who was cutting up an apple.

"Morning El, how'd you sleep?" Mike asks sweetly, scooting over enough for her to fit in between him and Lucas.

Grabbing a slice of a peeled apple from his plate, she looks over and innocently smiles at him, "Good! Me and Max had a lot of fun."

Turning her head to the side to whisper quietly she continues "matcher-maker plan is still a go."

Letting out a laugh, he throws his arm around her shoulder and pulls her into him affectionately, "good El, let me know if you need help."

Rolling his eyes, Lucas pushes his plate and stands in front of the picnic table.

"Now that everyone's here and done with heartfelt good mornings, I demand new sleeping arrangements!" proclaims Lucas.

"Mike and Dustin are the worst people to sleep with ever! His..." throwing an accusatory finger at Mike, "awkwardly long arms were all over the damn place and don't even get me started on the horrific noises coming from that one!" the angry boy exclaimed, pointing at a smiling Dustin.

"Lies! These are outright lies!" Dustin shoots back, defending himself. "I slept soundly, you must have me mistaken."

Bickering back and forth for fifteen minutes, Will, Max, Mike, and



Eleven chat about what to do for the afternoon.

“Oh, you guys! Let’s go kayaking!” Will announces happily, already running over to grab the two big kayaks they were able to put on top of the car.

With help from his mom, they got the kayaks unwrapped and placed them by the water. Running up to tell the group to get ready, he was pleased to see them already in their bathing suits but still bickering about the sleeping arrangements.

“Guys,” Will interrupts softly, “let’s just have fun right now, okay? We’ll fix the tent situation when night comes.”

Lucas and Dustin were pleased with that and raced Max and El down to the water, leaving Will and Mike shaking their heads with small smiles while holding six towels.

“So we can only fit four at a time,” Joyce announces, feeling a bit safer if their supervised while in the water, “so you guys just have to take turns.”

Running off towards the kayaks, the group determines, via rock-paper-scissors, that Dustin and El will sit out leaving the first group to be Will and Mike and Max and Lucas.

Mike may or may not have called Will as a partner immediately, sending a big grin towards a smirking Eleven when she noticed the pairing.

Dustin and El played knee-deep in the lake while the boys were out further racing each other.

Joyce looked out on the river, enjoying the hot sun and relaxing river.

Two minutes later, Hopper sat down next to her with an unopened beer, looking at the single mom whose eyes were currently closed as she basked in the sun.

“You havin’ a good time Joyce?” he asked, making her jump slightly causing him to let out a short laugh.

Smacking him in the arm, she smiles up at him and nods, “I am, it feels normal. Better than normal.”

The response made Hopper smile, moving closer to her and cracking open his beer.

Not being able to help himself, he blurts out “so what ever happened to that guy you were dating? Bart was it?”

Letting out a laugh and rolling her eyes playfully, she has no problem calling him out.

“Oh stop it Hopper, you know damn well his name wasn’t Bart. Me and *Bob* are just better off as friends. Not everyone can deal with the town loony, ya know” she adds on sarcastically.

Looking over at her with softened eyes, and involuntarily placing his hand over hers, he makes a noise of disapproval and slickly responds, “well definitely not a Radio Shack employee, how ‘bout the unattainable sheriff?”

Throwing her head back in laughter, she shakes her head “always been a flirt Hop, how ‘bout we start to prepare lunch for those crazies?” she says, changing the subject as quickly as possible.

Joyce has always felt something for Hopper, and vice versa, but she’s almost 100% sure that’s something she’s not prepared for.

While Dustin and El were in the middle of a playful splash war, the four boys paddle over after forty-five minutes of racing.

“El! El! Let’s go!” Max says eagerly, “it’s your turn!” Just about pushing Lucas off the boat, El hopped on behind Max and took off with her giggling.

“Take my place Dustin” Mike says, already off the kayak.

Always the feisty one, Lucas laughs at his friend. “Yeah, he looked like he was about to puke the entire time.”

Rolling his eyes, Mike protests “shut up, I was not!”

Deciding to get even for the years of harassing him about El, he continues “besides, how would you even know? You were staring at Max the whole time.” Sensing they were about to get into it, Dustin hopped on and paddled off with Will.

“What are you talking about?” Lucas asks, already defensive.

Smirking, Mike gives him a knowing look.

The boy just blankly stared at him for five seconds, “what is that stupid look for? I don’t like Max!” Letting out a cackle, Mike simply says, “I didn’t say you did.”

Narrowing his eyes at his taller, freckle-faced friend he scoffs and lightly pushes him. “But really” Mike continues, “we think she likes you too. And I know you do. So I don’t see the problem you’re having.”

“Who’s we?” Lucas exclaims, “why are you talking to someone else about....wait a second, it’s you and El isn’t it?”

Rolling his eyes, he lets out a sigh of annoyance, “just because you and her are grossly in love doesn’t mean other people have to be!”

Having enough of his defensive friend, Mike gives in. “Okay Lucas calm down! El was just trying to help, don’t be a dick.”

Looking out to where El and Max were currently winning the race against Dustin and Will, Mike quietly mumbles “she just wants everyone to be happy.”

Whether it was because of how he first treated El when they met or how, after everything she’s been through, she’s still so kind and pure, that resonated with him and, despite himself, he felt something shifting his chest.

Biting his lip, he let out a sigh of defeat.

After a few silent minutes, Mike heard “okay fine, I do like her.”

Smiling towards his friend, he nods “wow I never thought I’d hear *you* admit to liking a girl. Even though I already knew you did.”

Before Lucas could come back with a snarky reply, they hear footsteps behind them.

“Hey boys, time for lunch!” Joyce says happily, “try to get those crazy kids in, those boys need a break from getting beat!”

Laughing at the valid statement, Lucas and Mike flail their arms to get their attention only to be met by Will, Dustin, Max, and El a minute later after putting the kayaks to the side.

Sitting at the picnic table, the kids ate two plates of hamburgers and hotdogs while laughing at how terrible Dustin controlled the kayak.

“Oh c’mon guys! It’s hard!” Dustin exclaims, “I bet El was using her powers.”

El, who just took a big bite of a hot dog, shook her head with a big close-mouthed smile causing everyone to laugh while they enjoyed Joyce’s slightly burnt barbecued food.

## 5. Reminiscing

The remainder of the day was spent playing in the lake and kayaking. Max and El were, of course, unbeatable in all of the races. Joyce and Hopper were the closest, however, if it hadn't been for the big burly chief falling off of the kayak into the cold water.

The whole campsite could probably hear the boys cackling as they watched from the dirt where they were playing frisbee. After dinner, when nightfall came, Hopper made the nightly fire-pit and Joyce spread out a giant comforter big enough to fit the six teens who were all sprawled out on the fuzzy floral fabric.

"Okay, okay would you rather eat a banana dipped in mayo or..." Will pondered and then devilishly grinned, "eat macaroni and cheese that's covered in ketchup?" Greatly disturbed, Dustin shoots up from his laying down position and starts flailing his arms around.

"Stop it right there!" the curly-haired boy yelled, "don't you dare disgrace a beautiful cheesy bowl of macaroni and cheese with ketchup! Ketchup! Are you serious Will!" Giggling at the meltdown he knew would ensue, he innocently shrugs, "don't knock it till you try it, Dustin!"

On the other side of the blanket, Mike and El were laying down, hand-in-hand looking up at the sky. Despite the shouts from Dustin and loud laughs from Max, there was a certain comfortable silence between the two.

They loved hanging out with their friends, but something in both of them just needed the few moments of tranquility that came with being around one another.

"Mike," El says softly, "how many stars do you think there are?"

Turning his head to the side to look at her, he gives her a soft smile before saying, "I remember learning about this in Mr. Clarke's class because it was such a crazy thing to think about. There are billions, probably, like, 100 billion stars. Isn't that crazy? 100 billion!" he exclaimed.

Giggling at his excitement, she nods and turns her head to examine his face. "You have stars," she simply says, reaching out to poke his face lightly. "Yeah, I guess I do," he laughs out.

The two pairs of brown eyes meet and the amount of innocent love and adoration reflects in each. Mike leans in to place a kiss on El's cold lips and just meets them when he hears a throat clearing from above them.

Pulling back with wide eyes and a bright red face, he puts some space between him and the daughter whose father is now staring down at him with a contrasting look of disapproval and humor.

"What are you kids doing?" he asks, looking from the Wheeler boy to his adopted daughter who was squinting daggers at him.

"Looking at the stars," she says before slyly throwing in, "maybe you and Joyce should do it. Did you know there's 100 billion of them?"

Shaking his head at the tiny but feisty girl, he gives Wheeler a stern look before saying, "enjoy stargazing. It's even better when you look at them."

He knows the Wheeler boy is harmless, and has always had Eleven's best interests, but it's now his job to make him sweat a little bit.

Walking back over to Joyce who watched him from afar by the fire, she shook her head as he sat back down in the lawn chair. "Really!" she exclaims, "you're gonna scare the poor kid."

"Oh c'mon Joyce, I was harmless!" Letting out a sour laugh she defends the little boy she's known since he was in diapers.

"You're lucky he's nothing like you were when you were a teenager." Honestly, Hopper says, "if I thought he was anything like me at that age, he wouldn't be in walking distance from her."

It's not like he was a bad teenager. Hopper was always open and good-natured about what he wanted, like he is now. Before getting married young to Diane, he had all sorts of flings in high school; but his most memorable and promising one was with Joyce. It wasn't even a fling really, more like a friendship that was always expected to

be taken to the next level - kind of like now.

"I don't know Hop," Joyce says suddenly, "now that I think about it, you weren't all that bad in high school. I actually remember you being...sweet. Carrying a nerd's books to class and whatnot," she smirks, remembering her high school self with big glasses and baggy jeans.

Letting out a hearty laugh, Hopper shook his head, "you were cute, just couldn't find glasses that fit your face properly." Eyes wide in mock shock, she playfully hits him in the arm. "Oh, be quiet!"

Taking a sip from his beer, he hesitates before saying, "so why didn't we ever get together Joyce?" Eyes wide, she internally panics. She couldn't believe he had actually just said that! He's talking about something from twenty years ago, something she thought was totally one-sided and ridiculous to even consider.

"Jesus Hop!" Joyce exclaims, "where'd that come from?"

Raising his eyebrow at the petite woman, he gives her a knowing look, "you know exactly where it came from Joyce." Staring at one another, she saw the fire in his eyes and he saw the fear masked with confusion.

Growing antsy under his intense stare, she shook her head and stood up.

"It's getting late, I'm gonna tell the kids to start getting ready for bed." As she walks off, the chief leans over and runs his hands through his hair, trying to figure out if he wants to fight with or kiss Joyce Byers.

The kids, who were all stargazing now and making ridiculous shapes out of the stars, were interrupted by a slightly flustered looking Joyce. "Alright kids," the loving mother announces, "time for bed! It's almost midnight!"

Met with groans of protest interrupted shortly by big yawns, the teens took turns changing into pajamas and dispersing into the sleeping arrangements Lucas was still dreading.

"I'm serious Dustin," the dark, feisty boy snaps, "if you snore even once or end up near me, I'm gonna kill you."

Always the mediator, Will compromises, "it's okay Lucas! Me and Mike will just sleep in between you two." Deeming that solution okay, for now, he nods and goes into the tent to change.

Mike and El were off to the side hugging, their nightly routine, when his girlfriend leans on her tippy-toes and whispers, "I'm planning the Lumax date tonight."

Laughing, he pulls back and kisses her cheek, finding it adorable she's using the couple name Dustin had made up. In fact, he even made a couple name for them; Mike had no idea what she meant when declared 'we are Mileven' in his basement one night.

"It'll be a great date El," Mike reassures, "they'll both secretly love it." Smiling wide, she nods and runs off towards the tent where she lays in the darkness planning a fun day for her two strong-headed best friends.



## 6. The Date: Part 1

El woke up in the wee hours of the morning to the sound of shuffling a few feet away from her. Always fearless, she gets up from her sleeping bag and quietly unzips the tent. She's met with Joyce, who's preparing for an early breakfast.

"Oh no," she whispered, "I'm sorry El, did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet!" Shaking her head, the petite brown-haired girl walks over to sit at the picnic table where paper plates are laid out. "It's okay," she reassures, "I usually wake up early."

After a few moments of a comfortable silence, El turns to the mother of two. "So... I'm planning a date for Lucas and Max." Spinning around with a huge smile, leaving the bacon sizzling on the grill, Joyce sits across from El. "Oh yeah? What'd you come up with so far?"

She purses her lips to the side, thinking over her ideas from the past two nights. "Well, Mike took me on a picnic once and I really liked that. I thought maybe by the water would be pretty." Smiling at the idea, Joyce nods her head. "That's a great idea, El! When is this? I'll pack the food for you."

Eleven and Joyce decide that the Lumax date, the combined name made Joyce throw her head back in laughter, will be tonight.

While the kids are off exploring during the day, Joyce is gonna prepare sandwiches, an assortment of fruit, and, of course, marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers.

Awoken by the laughter of girlfriends and mothers, Mike and Will quietly leave the tent knowing Dustin will somehow make his way over to an angry Lucas.

Joyce and El turn their heads when they feel a presence, smiling at the brown-haired boy's who have a noticeable, and quite funny, height difference.

They join at the table, Mike next to El and Will next to Joyce.

Morning boys," the older woman says as she ruffles her youngest son's messy hair, "how'd you both sleep?"

"Good," Mike and Will say in unison.

"Lucas won't be happy that he was left in there with Dustin," El remarks causing everyone at the table to laugh besides Will, who was sniffing the air.

"Um, mom, were you cooking something?"

Jumping up from her spot on the bench with a yelp, she rushes over to the grill causing more giggles to ensue from the three teenagers.

Hopper came out to find El, Mike, Will, and Joyce eating a plate of burnt bacon and taking turns playing charades. Shaking his head at the crazy group, he plops down next to Joyce and gives her a lazy half-smile. "Mornin' everyone. I see Joyce forgot the bacon again."

Smacking his arm, she opens her mouth to shoot a remark back at the chief when they heard a loud groan of exasperation coming from the tents. "God damn it, Dustin! Get away from me!"

The big black tent is unzipped and an angry Lucas stomps over to the table. "Guys! Really!" he exclaims towards Mike and Will, who are trying their hardest to hold back their laughs. "He's so ridiculous, the snoring, the spooning, it's disturbing!"

Bursting out with laughter at the image of Dustin and Lucas spooning, Mike composes himself and then sarcastically says, "you were sleeping Lucas, did you really want us to wake you?" "I would've preferred that o—"

"Good morning friends! How are we all today!" the former big spoon shouts, his departure from the tent unnoticed due to Lucas's complaints.

The infuriated boy turns around fast and walks towards his curly-haired friend with an accusatory finger, "I told you to cut the shit, Dustin! You're making me wake up so damn angry and you're as chipper as can be."

The pink tent to the far left reveals messy-haired Max whose scowl matches Lucas's. "Could you assholes be any louder, it's only 8 am for God's sake," Max grouchy mumbles while grabbing a plate of bacon and sitting next to El, who is whispering in Mike's ear.

"I planned their date for tonight with Joyce. Maybe tomorrow morning they won't be so grumpy," Mike lets out another cackle and throws his arm around El.

"So what'd you plan?" the messy-haired boy mumbles, "a picnic?"

Squinting her eyes at her boyfriend, she looks at him in shock. "How did you know?!" she whisper-yells.

Raising his eyebrows and giving an innocent smile, he simply kisses her cheek and gets up to help Will and Joyce clean up leaving his girlfriend baffled at how well he knows her.

It's noon when the group decides to explore the other parts of the campsite, curious about the other campers. They meet an older couple, whose white dog jumps out of their hammock and greets them happily. It's the first time they hear Max squeal from excitement and Lucas is almost embarrassed by how happy the sound makes him.

El looks back to see Mike quietly talking to the gray-haired woman. She smiles wide and nods eagerly at him, putting her hand on his shoulder. Not wanting to be nosy, but feeling curious, she walks over and stands next to Mike who takes her hand.

"You, little lady, are a lucky girl. He is such a sweetie," the frail woman says to her. Nodding her head with a sweet smile, she nods, "I know."

Before a red-faced Mike has time to respond, he hears a bark and looks back to see Dustin and Lucas playing a game with a dog who appears to be winning against the teenaged boys.

"How do you two manage to lose tug-of-war with a 10-pound creature?" Max asks with a serious tone of judgment.

"Shut up Max! You try!" Dustin exclaims, "It's stronger than it looks."

Will giggles and agrees, snapping pictures of the adorable white fluff ball.

Meanwhile, Joyce just finished packing a quilt and food into a medium-sized wicker basket. "Aw Joyce, planning a picnic for us?" Hopper says as he comes up from behind her, "you shouldn't have."

Giggling with an eye roll, she hides the basket under one of the tables and faces Hop. "Oh please, this is for the Lumax date," she says playfully.

Looking at her with a bewildered expressions he asks, "what the hell is Lumax?"

"Lucas and Max, duh! Apparently, your girl is quite the little Cupid and planned a date for them."

Smiling at his daughter's plan, he gives an approving nod. "I didn't realize we'd have our work cut out for us, with all of this teenage romance!"

Throwing her head back in laughter, she gushes "isn't it so cute! I'm so glad they're all happy. They seem to like this trip so far." Hopper looks down at the smaller woman, "are you liking the trip so far Joyce?"

Giving him a nod, she smiles, "I am, I really am." "Me too."

She hadn't realized how close he had gotten to her, trapping her between his broad body and the table. Biting her lip nervously, she squints her eyes at him.

"What are you doing?" Smirking at her, he mimics, "what are *you* doing?"

They stare into each other's eyes for several seconds, her squinted eyes softening when she sees the tenderness in his clear blue orbs. Jim inches his face towards hers slowly, knowing she could be like a skittish cat.

"Hop," she says, her breath shaky. He stops with only millimeters between them, licking his lips and whispering, "it's okay Joyce."

Closing her eyes, she feels their lips meet and it feels exactly the way she knew it would - right.

The kids make their way back to the campsite around 4:30. They had met more campers, though none of them were around their age.

The twin toddlers they played with, of course, gravitated towards El, and the young girl around Jonathan's age took a group photo of them.

When the loud kids are closer, they see Joyce and Hopper sitting next to each other his arm wrapped around her shoulders and her head lightly resting on him while they laugh softly.

Hearing their footsteps and suddenly hushed voices, Joyce jumps away and turns back waving towards the group. "Hey guys, are you hungry?"

Met with nods and Dustin's shout of "always!", Hop gets up and goes over to the grill to prepare the food. While the boys wash up in the bathroom, El quickly runs over to Joyce.

"Did you make the basket?" El asks excitedly. Winking at the brown-haired girl, she nods her head towards the picnic table two spots away. "So the plan is for them to go while we eat dinner, right?"

El nods eagerly and thanks Joyce with a big hug. The mother squeezes back and lightly kisses her on top of her head before El runs off to find the basket and Mike.

## 7. The Date: Part 2

Ten minutes later, Max and El were down by the water per El's request. "Why'd you wanna come down here? Do you want to go in the lake before we eat or something? Because you can swim after you eat, that's just a stupid myth." Shaking her head, El bites back a smile and, right on time, Lucas and Mike come into view a few feet away.

Catching on immediately about what is happening, Lucas looks at Mike with an angry expression. "Are you guys serious!" he exclaims. The freckle-faced boy was sure he was about to be punched in the face had Max not turned around and smiled at them.

*So she must not know their plan*, Lucas thought. He throws an annoyed look at Mike and, hesitantly, walks closer to the two girls. Mike joins him and El runs behind the tree a few feet away. She plops the wicker basket in between the four of them and simply smiles.

Max, with knitted eyebrows, looks at her best friend's face and then the basket in between them. "What the hell is happening?" she asks, a sinking feeling in her stomach because she feels like she already knows. Between El's odd behavior, Mike's smirk, and Lucas's pissed off scowl, she tries not to get embarrassed by the idea of this planned date with a boy she's positive doesn't feel the same way.

Max has never seen herself as the type of girl who would be considered dateable; she's not cute and girly or soft-spoken and kind like El. She would never change herself for anyone but, as she's seeing the look on Lucas's face, she almost wishes she could.

"I'm sorry, guys! I was going to tell you both but I wanted to plan a surprise date for my two best friends," she said sweetly and adding on with a wink, "I'm a matchmaker," which got a chuckle out of Mike.

Shaking her head, the fiery red-head lets out a humorless laugh. "What makes you think he wants to go on a date with me?"

Before El could answer, Lucas, who's rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly, walks towards Max. "I, uh, do wanna go on a date with

you. Only if you want too though, it's okay if you think it's weird."

Shocked by his words, her face brightens. "Oh. Well, yeah, I liked the idea of a date too. I just thought...you wouldn't want too."

Squealing, El runs over to the uncharacteristically awkward duo and hugs them tightly. "Have fun Lumax!" she exclaims, taking Mike's hand to run off back to where the rest of their friends were.

"Lumax?" Max and Lucas say simultaneously, followed by a laugh. Biting her lip, she looked at the dark-haired boy. "So, are you sure you're okay with this?"

Smiling at his friend, he smiles and nods. "Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Shrugging her shoulders, she mumbles "I don't know, I thought you'd just see me as one of the guys like most people do. I'm not exactly...girly" she says as she lets out a nervous chuckle.

It takes him a few seconds to build up the courage to take her hand, "That's what I like about you, Max. I mean, I just like you. A lot. You don't care about what others think and you do what you want, you know who you are and that's the coolest thing."

Feeling her heart flip, she smiles up at him brightly and squeezes his hand in gratitude. "Oh, well, I like you too."

Romance was uncharted territory for both of them. Lucas always secretly longed for a girlfriend. It started with seeing his parents in love after fifteen years together and continued when he watched the way Mike looked at Eleven and vice versa. He just never knew how to approach it, wanting to keep up a tough front but also needing to let himself be vulnerable with the right one; right now, his fourteen-year-old self thinks he found that person.

After Max squeezes his hand, she lets go and walks over to the wicker basket. "Oh hell yeah, El did good!" she says, pulling out two sandwiches, a giant tub of fruit, and a big bar of chocolate. Laughing at his date, he laid out the quilt that was under the food and patted the spot next to him. "Well, let's get this date goin' pretty lady."

It was the first time he saw Max full on blush.

After dinner with the rest of the group, it was Dustin's turn to help Will and Joyce clean up, leaving Mike and Eleven to have some time alone. Hand-in-hand, the two walked closely. "How do you think the date is going?" Looking up at her boyfriend with a shrug, she thinks back to the last few minutes of Lucas and Max's encounter. "Good, Max was so happy when Lucas said he wanted to go on the date."

Mike looked down at El a few moments later and saw her eyebrows furrowed. "What's wrong?" he asked, stopping them and lifting his thumb to her forehead to smooth out the crevices.

"I don't know, I just don't understand why she thought he wouldn't want to. She's nice, funny, AND pretty. Dustin says that's a rare combination."

Laughing and shaking his head, Mike raises an eyebrow. "Oh did he?" Nodding, she smiles and then takes a look at their surroundings. "Wait, this is where we were before. With the cute old couple and their dog."

Biting his lip to hide his smile, he nods and leads her over to the hammock between the two trees. "What are you doing, we can't go on this...thing!" she whisper-yells with a giggle. As he plops down, trying his best not to fall over and embarrass himself, he gives her a sweet smile. "I know, that's why I asked Judy if I could come back later and hang out on it for a little. I knew you probably hadn't seen one before and it's a lot of fun."

Smiling at his gesture, she cautiously gets on the strange contraption only to flip over and fall on her butt. "Oh my god, El! Are you okay?" he frantically asks, greeted with the unfamiliar sound of her boisterous laughter. Relieved to see she wasn't hurt, and seeing her on the ground hysterically laughing, made him laugh as well - this left the two teens wildly laughing in the middle of the campsite.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she gets up and slowly leans down on the hammock while grabbing onto Mike's arm. "I've never heard you laugh like that, El." Giggling again at what just happened, she had to calm herself down. "I just couldn't believe I fell off, right onto my



butt! What is this crazy thing anyway, Mike?”

Moving slowly to put his arm around her, she lays her head down on his chest and their feet intertwine. “A hammock. You see how it’s between the two trees? That’s how it stays up, so it’s kind of like an outdoor bed.” Lifting her head slightly, she sees the cords around the tree and nods.

They swung lightly on the hammock for almost an hour, giggling away and quietly counting the stars. A few miles away, their best friends were doing the same while laying hand-in-hand, silently thanking El and her matchmaking ways.

## 8. Girl Talk

Mike and Eleven spent forty minutes talking about everything from school to movies to random animal facts.

On their way back to the campsite, hand-in-hand, they see the old couple sitting on the porch together; the woman knitting, the man with a book in his hands, though his eyes are on her. Gray-haired Judy looks up and smiles softly at the teens, waving goodbye before turning to her husband.

Mike doesn't voice his thoughts aloud but he wishes to be that way in forty-years with a certain pixie-haired girl humming The Clash beside him.

On the other side of the campsite down by the water, Lucas and Max are lying on their sides, facing one another, reminiscing about their first time officially meeting.

"Oh my god!" the red-head exclaims, "remember when you idiots dressed up as Ghostbusters!"

Playfully rolling his eyes, Lucas lets out a laugh. "How could I forget! That was a disaster! We really thought the proton pack would impress you too!"

Shaking her head, she gives him a bright smile and he can't help but stare at her. Her smile drops after a few seconds, giving him a wary look.

"What?" she asks, quietly. He continues to examine her face, noticing all her extra freckles from the summer sun.

"You're beautiful," he says, shyly. They hadn't noticed their hands between them, finally about to meet.

Eyes growing wide, she jumps up like an electric shock went through her whole body.

"What happened, Max?" he joins her on his feet, confused. "Nothing," she shakes her head, "I'm uh, I'm getting pretty tired actually. Is it

okay if we pack this up?" Biting his lip, he nods and they start to pack up the food and blanket surrounded by the humming of crickets.

~

They walk the short distance back to see the group around the fire with Joyce and Hopper.

"Oh my god, you guys!" Dustin shouts, "we're talking about the chief in high school! He was such a dou-"

Earning a glare from the 6'3" man, he second guesses his word choice, "delight! Oh, such a sweet delight!"

Joyce bursts out laughing, looking at the kids who are standing five feet apart. "You guys have fun?" she asks hesitantly, "hopefully the food was all right!"

Giving a small smile, Max nods. "It was great Miss Byers, thank you. I'm really tired though, so I'm gonna go off to bed." She waves to the group before scurrying off towards the tents.

El gives Lucas a confused face which is only met with a defeated shrug as he plops down next to Will. "It is pretty late, you guys," Joyce says reluctantly, "how about you get ready for bed? I'll clean this up."

As the boys and El go towards the tents to change, Joyce smirks at Hopper. He raises an eyebrow at her playfully, "what's that look for?"

They truly are quite the sight; tiny Joyce poking the middle of Hopper's chest so playfully like it doesn't resemble picking a fight with a grizzly bear.

"Oh nothing, you douche!" she says before hysterically laughing. Not being able to help but laugh with her, he shakes his head. "I can't believe that little bastard! He is a piece of work."

Helping her clean up the mess from their relaxing night, he puts out the fire before quickly pulling her behind the parked van. Joyce lets out a yelp, "oh my god Hop, what the he-"

His lips interrupt her, gentle and yet full of such passion. He pushes her towards the hood, her hands that flew around his neck now going through the back of his thinning hair. He pulls back to smirk at her, "see what ya get for calling me bad names, Joyce?" Giggling, she rolls her eyes and pulls him back down to meet her lips again.

~

Mike and Lucas are standing off to the side while the other boys and El get changed. "So," Mike probes, "how was it?"

Groaning, Lucas holds his head in his hands. "Holy shit man, I don't know what happened! We were having such a great time all night, talking and laughing and then all of the sudden she just jumped up and away from me!"

Turning his head to the side, he ponders his friend's issue. "You must've said something!" Mike insists, "why would she just randomly do that!"

Lucas hears footsteps behind him, knowing El's here to say goodnight to Mike and he shrugs before nodding towards her. "Say night to your girl before we start gossiping like soccer moms."

Chuckling, he awkwardly pats Lucas's arm before walking towards El who was patiently waiting for him.

"Sorry," she says quietly, "I didn't want to interrupt, looked important." Kissing her cheek, he shakes his head, "more important than you? Never," he says playfully. Her nose scrunches up, despite the blush on her cheeks.

"I hope the date went okay," she says in a hushed tone, "I don't want Max to be mad at me." Shaking his head, he reassures his girlfriend, "I'm sure it went great, El, she won't be mad at you." Nodding her head, she wraps her arms around his waist and buries her face in his chest.

Mike had grown so much so fast. At a towering 5'9", he dwarfed El's petite body so their hugs frequently turned out like this. He places a kiss on her head, letting his lips linger on her hair for several seconds

before she pulls away. "Night El, see you in the morning."

"Night Mike," a sweet smile breaks out on her face, "thanks for taking me on that...ham-thing," she says before running off towards her tent, eager to get the details about her friend's date. Mike, on the other hand, is left standing there helplessly staring with a stupid smile on his face.

~

El zips open the tent, observing the redhead already snuggled up in her sleeping bag her back facing El's side. Slightly nervous, El sits down on her sleeping bag and plays with her fingers.

She waits two minutes, silently counting in her head, before quietly asking, "are you mad at me?"

Max quickly turns around, seeing her timid friend with a fearful expression and her heart breaks. "Of course not, El! It's...it's my fault the date didn't work."

With her eyebrows knitted together, El crawls over to Max and sits next to her with her legs crossed. "What happened?" she asks quietly.

The red-head deeply sighs before explaining, "after the first five minutes, we had so much fun, El. We were just laughing and talking and... when I was talking, he was just really listening to me, you know? No one ever listens to me and he just seemed so...interested in what I had to say."

Softly smiling, El nods. "He really likes you. I could tell the first day we got here, before that even."

Max, looking like she's ready to cry, shakes her head. "I'm so stupid, I fucked it up. I totally fucked it up. He called me beautiful and I completely freaked out, El. I basically jumped away from him and ran off the lake."

El's so intently studying her with another confused expression on her face, "why did that freak you out?"

Exasperated, she shrugs, "I don't know! It's weird!"

Raising her eyebrow, she shakes her head. "But you are beautiful Max. And funny and nice. Dustin said that's a rare combination," she repeats with a cheeky smirk.

Rolling her eyes at the boy's comment, she shrugs. "I guess it's just... new to me. I never really dated anyone before. Weren't you scared when you first started dating Wheeler?"

El thinks about it for several moments before shaking her head. "No, but Mike never makes me feel scared. He's just so...good and sweet and patient. It always feels right when I'm with him. Like I should be with him."

Smiling at her friend, she shakes her head in amusement. "I can't believe you guys are so in love, it's crazy." Shrugging, El crawls back over to her side of the tent and they lay in silence for a few minutes.

"You shouldn't be scared Max," El suddenly says, breaking the silence. "I think you're scared of getting hurt, but I know Lucas wouldn't hurt you." Max doesn't respond, absorbing all of the events from the night.

"...And if he does, I can make him pee his pants as many times as you want."

Max is laughing hysterically until there are tears in her eyes and El can't help but join her in laughter. "You're a great friend, El...thank you," she mumbles quietly before turning over with a smile on her face.

## 9. Double Ride

### Notes for the Chapter:

If it's not obvious, I honestly have NO idea where this is going.

Hopefully, the mindless fluff and campsite shenanigans are a good time?

The sun was just coming up when Joyce was woken abruptly from the sound of the scratchy zipper of her tent. Sitting up quickly, she feels herself relax at the sight of Jim Hopper's broad shoulders in the entrance of the tent.

"Shit, sorry Joyce," he says apologetically, "I was trying to be quiet." With a soft chuckle, she waves her hand to the side "it's okay, are you already getting up?" The chief goes over to Joyce, patting down her morning hair and nodding.

"You've been making breakfast every day since we've been here, I'll get it this time." "Is this because I've burned it every time?" she asks, squinting her eyes at him playfully. With a hearty laugh, he shrugs his shoulders innocently and places a kiss on her head. With that, Joyce lies back down and closes her eyes contently.

A few hours later, everyone but Max is up and chowing down on the eggs and bacon made by Hopper. "Well, Mrs. Byers certainly didn't make it this time," Dustin jokingly says, winking at Joyce.

With a giggle and a roll of her eyes, Joyce shushes him, "now you're cleaning this up all by yourself!" Lucas sat between El and Mike, still reeling from his date last night. "Great, this is just great," the boy complains, "now she's avoiding me!"

He had spent hours agonizing over it last night. He truly believed it had gone well until he blurted out that she was beautiful. He's good at science and baseball and video games, but girls? He can even admit, not so much. Being called beautiful seemed like a good thing to say, but with the way she reacted along with this being new territory for him, he truly felt clueless.

Patting his friend's shoulder reassuringly, Mike tries to calm him down, "I'm sure she's just sleeping Lucas, it's still pretty early." Nodding her head, El chimes in, "yeah, we stayed up late talking."

With his eyes wide, Lucas tugs on El's pink sleeve, "did you talk about the date? What did she say?"

Shaking her head, El simply says, "can't tell you."

"Oh c'mon El, why the hell not!" Lucas says, his voice gradually getting louder.

"Private" El calmly says, not aware of the concept of girl code but somehow knowing it wouldn't be right to tell Lucas.

With a groan, Lucas shouts back "That's bullshit, El!"

"All right, Lucas, enough!" Mike says, nudging his friend back. Rolling his eyes at overprotective Mike mode, he snarkily counters back, "shut up, Mike! It's not lik-"

"Hey guys," they hear from behind them. Lucas spins around and shyly smiles at the messy-haired red-head. "Oh, uh hey Max. How'd you sleep?" Smiling sweetly at him, she nods, "good, thanks."

There were a few seconds of awkward silence until it was broken by Will's excitement. "Guys! The family next to us just told us they offer horseback riding a mile away! Let's go, let's go, let's go!" he says chipperly.

All of the kids along with Joyce and Hopper walk the mile down to the trail where they see two other big groups waiting for their horses. When the big animals come into view, El's eyes widen and she instinctually grabs Mike's hand. "Um, I don't know if I want to," El says aloud.

Everyone turns around to see her apprehensive face and Hopper goes over to ruffle her curly hair.

Half the time, Hopper still felt like he had no idea what he was doing raising this telekinetic teenaged girl; but he'd really come to love her and views it as his duty to make sure she isn't afraid to try new



things.

"It's not that bad, kid" he reassures, "why don't you just try it? If you don't like it, then you can get off, yeah?" Pursing her lips to the side, she asks, "well, can I go with Mike?"

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Hopper nods, "I'm sure that's fine, yeah."

Their group advisor comes over, explaining the rules and safety measures before asking if anyone else wants to double ride. Without looking in Lucas's direction, Max grabs his hand and raises their arms, "us!"

He looks over at her like he's about to pass out and she flushes, "is that okay?" she whispers, "sorry, I've just never done it before and..."

Shaking out of his daze, he nods, "no, of course!" Max doesn't miss the smirk Eleven throws her away.

Once everyone is saddled up and ready, Hopper's horse takes off leaving the rest of the group behind. "Oh of course," Dustin complains, "why wouldn't he get the cool horse?"

"They're all cool," Will defends, "look at my guy's stripes!" Mike nods in agreement and feels El press up against his chest.

"You okay, El?" his breath tickling her ear.

When she doesn't respond, he grabs her hand and places it on the side of the horse's neck. "Pet her," he says encouragingly. Hesitantly, she drags her hand over coarse white fur and nods her head. "I like her," she declares.

"I think she likes you too," Mike reassures before placing his head behind the crook of her neck and leaving a soft kiss.

"Jesus Christ," Lucas says, him and Max's horse next to them, "don't you two ever stop!"

Resisting the urge to flip him off, Mike turns his head towards him with squinted eyes. "Oh, sorry," Mike says, voice dripping with

sarcasm, "should we go ahead? Seems like you two have a lot to discuss."

He smirks before patting the horse, causing her to trot a little faster. "That wasn't nice," the blushing pair hears El say before it's just them surrounded by the sunshine and pine trees.

Max is beyond grateful she's in front of Lucas, blocking him from her embarrassingly red face. There are a few moments of silence before she breaks it, "he's right though, I want to say something..."

Lucas shakes his head, "Max, really, it's okay if you didn't like the da-"

"I loved it!" she blurts out before letting out an awkward giggle. "I mean, I really liked it. It was great and you're great and I've just never been on a date before so I'm pretty damn clueless."

Biting his lip to suppress a giggle at her cute fluster-ness, he agrees. "I don't know either Max, but I know that I really like you and I really want to go on another date."

Her face brightens up and she lets out an uncharacteristic giggle, which she quickly covers with her hand. "Oh, um okay, cool." With a smirk, he pokes her side, "don't you mean totally tubular?" She elbows him lightly before they both burst out laughing.

Sometime later, they're reunited with the group and see Joyce speaking to everyone animatedly. "I used to go horseback riding all the time when I was younger!" she exclaims, "I'm so glad we did this."

Nobody misses the soft smile Hopper has on his face while he's watching the mother of two reminisce.

It's broken, however, when the wind blows and a horrific stench passes through, all of them letting out groans.

"Oh, of course, it's your horse, Dustin!" Lucas says in disgust.

"What are you talking about? That wasn't George!" the accused boy defends.

"I don't think that's his name," Will says softly, in amusement.

"Um it absolutely was, George! He literally just started shitting while walking!" Even the adults were in tears from laughter for the remainder of the trail.

The sun was setting when the group of eight walked back to their campsite, tired and starved from their day out and about. The kids were in front, pushing and shoving each other playfully. Joyce and Hopper were walking close together, the smaller woman's arm occasionally hitting the side of him.

"You were in your element today Joyce, like some sexy little cowgirl." Blushing bright red, she yelps, "oh my god Hop!", covering her face with her hands.

"I'm serious Joyce, I had no idea you loved horses."

Still coming down from her blush, she nods. "I did it all the time as a little girl with my grandparents until we moved to Indiana."

Humming in response, they walk in silence and Joyce doesn't even realize their hands are connected until there standing in front of the campsite, the kids gawking at them.

Disconnecting their hands, Joyce shyly asks, "so, uh, who's hungry?"

## 10. Finally

Hopper made hotdogs and cheeseburgers for everyone now seated at the picnic tables, talking about when they first met Dustin in the second grade. Mike laughs when he thinks back to their first time seeing the toothless, curly haired boy, “he came barreling into class like a psychopath and apologized to Mr. Clark,”

"Oh, don't you mean my lord?" Will interjects, the whole group bursting out into laughter.

"Shut up guys, I was so cool!" Dustin defends, causing Max to let out a scoff, "yeah, exactly, was."

Before the bickering he knew would ensue, Hopper loudly announced it was time to clean up, Joyce and Will being the first to volunteer while the rest went over to set up the fire.

Mother and son were gathering the crumb-filled paper plates and napkins before Will softly spoke, “so, mom, are you having fun?”

Looking at her sweet son, she nods. “I am, how ‘bout you?”

With a big smile, he responds, “yeah, I just wish Jonathan was here, that would’ve been fun.”

Dropping the plates in the trash, she wipes her hands on her jeans and puts her arm around Will, who has finally grown a few inches past her. “I’m sure he wants to be here with you, too.”

The oldest Byers boy had applied to several schools near and outside of Hawkins. It was a tough decision but he ultimately chose to dorm at an art school in Chicago, a little over three hours away. Joyce was overjoyed he didn’t let her and Will hold him back, wanting only the best for her talented older son.

She sees Will open his mouth to say something before closing it again.

“You can ask Will, it’s okay,” she reassured, knowing where this was going. She noticed his curious looks when he noticed Hop’s arm

around her the other night and then again when they were caught holding hands before.

“I just...I’m just wondering what’s going on with you and the Chief?” Sitting him down on the now clean picnic table, she shrugs, “we’ve always been friends, you know that and he helped me out a lot that year you were...”

It’s not often that they talk about when he went missing, the scariest week the entire Byers family had ever experienced.

“I know, mom. It’s just you guys seem different...I mean, as long as you’re happy.”

Joyce takes her son's hand and squeezes it. “I’m the happiest I’ve ever been Will, my boys are okay and we’re all having fun, right?” she says softly, eyes brimming with tears.

He stands up and leans over to give his mom a long hug before shooting her a soft smile and running off towards his friends and the roaring fire. Wiping her eyes, Joyce feels her heart swell as she watches her son and his friends laugh at the chief they all once found intimidating.

“So, hypothetically speaking El, what would it take for you to make us fly?” Dustin asked, him and Lucas looking hopeful.

Scanning the campsite, a smirk appears on her slightly sunburnt face. “I can make you fly into the lake,” she says matter of factly.

“Absolutely not! It’s freezing!” Lucas interjects at the same time Dustin exclaims, “deal!” The boys start arguing about how bad it would really be that they miss El lowering her face. It goes noticed by Hopper, however, who steps in front of her.

“Don’t you dare, kid! Are you crazy?” Hop sternly says, appalled that she’d even consider this.

Shooting him a look of disapproval along with a discreet shake of her head, the brunette faces a pile of orange and red leaves that lay a few feet away. Still, in the midst of arguing, they don’t realize the big pile of leaves being pushed towards their direction, swirling around them

and hitting them in the face and chest.

Remnants of dirt and tiny rocks also fly around them, causing them to shut their eyes and let out high pitched screams. Max, Mike, Will, and even Hopper are left hysterical laughing watching the two teenage boys scream like they're getting attacked by a rabid animal.

The apparent windstorm stops and the leaves drop, surrounding the boys who are clutching onto each other. "WHAT THE FUCK ELEVEN!" Dustin shouts, Lucas just staring at the orange and red mess that surrounds them.

"Ask me to make you fly one more time," El sassily says, shrugging her shoulders carelessly. Hopper looks at her proudly and shoots her a smile before joining Joyce who was watching from the picnic table.

"That was so awesome, El!" Max yelps happily, giving her a high five from the spot next to her. Lucas is still looking at the ground, "I... can't believe you did that," the shocked boy says.

"Hey, this is why you don't mess with my girl," Mike says, throwing his arm around El's shoulders while she nuzzles into him.

Dustin and Lucas go over to El and throw out their hands to her. "Truce," they say. She shakes their hands before picking up a leaf by her feet and mockingly throws it at them. Lucas takes a spot next to Max while Dustin goes back to the other side of the fire.

"Wow what a tough guy you are, standing up to all of those scary leaves," Max says sarcastically. "There were so many!" Lucas responds, a playful shocked look on his face. "Uh huh," the redhead responds, squinting her eyes doubtfully with a smirk. "Quiet," he says, nudging her.

They're interrupted by Dustin who decided him and Will are gonna start a scary story, alternating every few sentences.

"On a cold dark night....an army of haunted leaves plagued the town..."

Already rolling his eyes at his friend's nonsense, Lucas turns to talk to

Max. "He is so ridiculous," he whispers.

Letting out a snort, she nods, "he really is, who would actually be scared of leaves....oh, wait."

He stares at her goofy smile directed towards him and can't help but smile back at her. The boy doesn't even realize he's leaning in until he sees her apprehensive look turn into a determined one and feels their slightly chapped lips meet. Their lips awkwardly linger, him putting more pressure than needed but her strangely liking the feeling.

They pull apart at the same time and he swears he's never seen her look prettier. Giving him a shy smile, she whispers in his ear, "finally", before leaning her head on his shoulder. He faces front, placing his hand on top of hers thinking the very same thing.

El, being El, notices the kiss and doesn't say anything but can't hide the smirk on her face. Mike looks down at his girlfriends grin and it's not until he sees his friends beside them, coozied up with a faint blush on their cheeks, that he understands why she's looking so giddy.

Leaning down, he blows in her ear and she looks up at him with a scrunched up nose. "Do I need to get the leaves to attack you too?" she says.

He thinks she's trying to be threatening but she's just too damn cute with her messy brown hair and doe-like eyes that he can't help but laugh and kiss her on the cheek. "Please do, that was fucking awesome babe." With a giggle, she leans her legs over his lap and places her head on his shoulder.

"And then BOOM! The leaves attacked two little boys screeching like babies" Will said, breaking into a fit of laughter.

"Oh, c'mon Will!" Dustin exclaimed, "that can't be part of the story! That actually happened!"

"Yeah! And it was hilarious," the boy shot back, causing everyone to laugh again. Hop joined them an hour later to warn them it was time to put out the fire and go to bed.

After changing and saying night to El, Mike joins his three other friends in the tent. He plops down on the far-right side next to Lucas and looks at him with a raised eyebrow. Lucas looks at him with a confused sneer, “why are you looking at me like that?”

Mike doesn’t say anything, just continuing his weird stare down, “stop it, Mike!” Lucas says, “what the hell are you doing?”

Deciding on a different approach, Mike announces to the other boys, “guys! Lucas and Max kissed!” With shocked faces, Dustin let out a “whoop whoop” and Will clapped, patting his friend on the back, “how was it?”

Rolling his eyes, Lucas gets defensive, “are you really gonna ask me how the kiss was? Are we 7th-grade girls at a sleepover?”

He’s met with three blank stares that remain that way for several seconds before he breaks, “okay fine! It was...cool,” Letting out a snort, Mike shakes his head, “really? cool? That’s the word you’re using to describe it?”

“Oh, sorry Mike,” the darker boy says sarcastically, “how should I be describing it? Romantic? Amazing? What’s the word you use, breathtaking?”

Scuffing, he rolls his eyes, “I’ve never used that word! I’m just saying cool sounds like she beat you in another round of Dig Dug.”

Letting out an annoyed groan, he throws his body down, “I don’t know, Mike! I just know I like her....and I wanna do it again,” Will can barely contain holding back his “aww” which causes Mike and Dustin to let out a laugh and Lucas to groan even more.



## 11. Strong

Max woke up to what sounded like strangled cries, scaring her half to death at the thought it was some sort of wild animal outside of the tent. She sits up in a daze and peers over to El's side when she realizes the noises are coming from her. Crawling over, she sees her friend's short brown hair sticking to her clammy forehead, body jerking, and eyelids twitching.

"No! No! Please, stop it!" the sleeping girl screams. Frantically, Max shakes the small girl, "El! El! Hey, it's okay, wake up!" Max gives her one more good shove with another shout of her full name, "Eleven! Wake up!"

Frantically sitting up, she looks around and feels embarrassed when she realizes Max just witnessed one of her nightmares. "I'm...I'm sorry, Max," she says breathlessly.

"Don't even, what happened? Are you okay?" her friend asks, still a little freaked out by the agony El appeared to be in while sleeping.

Her answer gets cut off by the sound of their tent's zipper being unfastened, Hopper's big frame taking up the opening.

"You girls all right in here?" he asks, eyes zooming in on his daughter. Both nodding, El gives him what she thinks is a reassuring nod, "sorry, yeah...bad dream."

Hopper knew her nightmares, while certainly lessened within the past two years, were still existent. There was one month, in the beginning, he swore she woke up every night screaming, his heart breaking more and more each time. Slowly, but surely, they were happening only once every few months. The worst part seemed to be that there were no apparent triggers for these awful relapse of memories; they just happened out of nowhere, when it seemed like things were getting better and almost normal, only for the poor girl to be tormented again in her sleep.

Giving her a short nod, he shoots her a knowing look. "Try to go back to sleep ladies," he says reluctantly before zipping the tent back up.

After hearing his retreating footsteps, Max turns her head to her friend, "holy shit El, that was no bad dream!" she yells in a hushed tone, "you looked so fucking terrified, I've never seen you like that,"

Looking at her friend with a sad face, she gives her a helpless shrug before turning around to face the wall of the tent. She lays there in the dark, tears brimming her eyes, counting silently in her head.

'One..

two..

three..'

~

In the next tent over, Mike's eyes open and he looks around the dark tent before leaning up on his elbows. He hears footsteps outside the tent and curiously goes over to unzip the scratchy zipper, peaking out to see the Chief sitting on a log by the dead fire, lighting a cigarette.

His lanky body quietly slips out of the opening and goes to sit across from Jim. The older man doesn't even have to look up to know who sat in front of him, barely making out the boy's features when he looks up in the dark Indiana night.

There's a comfortable silence between them for a few minutes, the pair surrounded by the cold air and smell of pine. Shockingly, it's Hopper who breaks the silence, "she had a nightmare tonight," he states simply, "she hadn't had one for a few months now."

Feeling his heart drop, Mike looks towards the purple tent occupied by the girls and runs his hand through his hair, suddenly so full of anger. "It's so fucked up," the boy says darkly, "those assholes still get to her, even when she tries so hard to forget about them."

Hop hears the pure anger in the young boy's voice, still shocked by the connection between two 14-year-olds. He saw how withdrawn and depressed the Wheeler kid seemed when his bald-headed friend disappeared back in 1983. He also saw the look on both of their faces when they eventually reunited at the Byers home almost a full year later.

It's those very looks that now, while they freak him out as her father, slightly reassure him that this young boy has honest intentions and feelings for Eleven that you don't find in most married couples living at the end of a cul-de-sac.

"She's strong though," Hop says determinedly, "she'll be okay." Biting his lip, Mike agrees with a simple nod of his head. Putting out his cigarette and dropping it into the ashes from the fire only a few hours before, he stands up and nods toward the boy's tent, "get some sleep, kid."

~

'...one thousand one hundred and ninety-nine..,'

'one thousand two hundred..,'

Sitting up frustrated, El wipes her wet eyes and pulls at her short brown hair. Looking over to see her friend had fallen back asleep within the past 20 minutes, she quietly gets up and unzips the tent in need of fresh air. She walks around in a daze, only to notice her boyfriend standing near the fire teepee. The girl feels her tears resurface with a vengeance, her vulnerability heightening at the sight of the boy who was one of the first people in her life to show her kindness and friendship.

Mike hears the crunch of twigs and can make out a tiny figure, cast by the bright moon, standing a few feet away from him. "El?" he asks, reaching his hand out.

The girl's sock covered feet speed up, grabbing her boyfriend's hand and burying her face in his chest. "What happened, El?" he asks softly, bending down to her ear.

Her shoulders begin to shake, cries muffled in his blue sweatshirt and Mike's heart drops. He wraps his arm tightly around her waist, the other hand calmly rubbing up and down her back while his lips rest on the top of her head. He's not sure how long they stand there, him swaying them back and forth slowly, occasionally mumbling "it's okay," on her messy brown hair.

He guides them backward toward the cold lawn chair he was just sitting in, placing her in his lap, her legs dangling off the side. She leans her head on his shoulder, her leftover tears wetting his sweatshirt.

She laughs humorlessly when she sees she's left a wet mark on him, "sorry about your shirt," she says, sounding defeated. Shaking his head dismissively at her apology, he gently asks, "what happened, baby?"

Sniffling due to her leftover tears, she takes a deep breath before opening her mouth. "I...don't know, these dreams just come sometimes and I can't stop them," she says, sounding frustrated. "I've been so happy here with everyone and then the lab and Papa are just..." she pauses, "it's so stupid Mike, it's so fucking stupid," she says with a shaky voice.

"I know, El," Mike says, hating to hear her so defeated and uncharacteristically El, "I'm sorry." Shaking her head, she buries her face in his shoulder and bites her lip in an effort to stop the tears. A few minutes pass, the quiet darkness surrounding the two melancholy teens.

"But you're so strong, El," Mike says into the night, "the strongest person I've ever met. Please don't ever forget that." She looks up at him with watery eyes before kissing his cheek and wiping away the wetness from her face. "And you're also kind and funny and smart and..."

She pokes his freckled cheek after letting out a small giggle, "be quiet you mouth breather," she says softly.

"And beautiful," he says quickly, "I'm sorry, but I just couldn't forget that one," he says cheekily. Shaking her head, she nudges her goofy boyfriend's side. "You wanna go back in the tent?" he asks her against her hair.

Shaking her head, she cuddles into him further, bringing her legs up to rest her feet on his thigh. He begins to hum The Police's Every Breath You Take, the song they had kissed to after a year of not seeing each other. Reminiscing about that night, he almost misses her

mumbled "I love you, Mike."

He was about to ask her to repeat herself but he noticed her breath turned even and her body slacked against his chest, the young girl finally at peace. He kissed that top of her head and mumbled his own declaration of love before resting his head on hers and closing his eyes, enjoying the feeling of their closeness before he, too, fell asleep.

~

It's a late morning for everyone, Joyce being the first to wake around ten a.m. Frantically, she shoots up and out to start preparing for what she thought would be starving children laying around the campsite. She was met with silence, something so uncommon during this trip.

"Guess they're all finally catching up on much-needed sleep," Hop says from behind her, smiling at her crazy, knotty hair from her long slumber.

Joyce notices Mike and El snuggled up together on the lawn chair, the girl curled up on her boyfriend's lap with his two arms wrapped around her. The woman turns around to look at the chief, "how'd that happen?" she questions, not believing he's still standing there beside her instead of ripping the kids apart.

"She had a rough night."

"Poor girl," Joyce says, with a frown. Hop nods before observing the two, not believing the feeling in his chest.

"He's so good to her, I really have been giving him a lot of shit haven't I?" he says regretfully. Joyce looks at him with a smile and nods, "I would've loved to have someone take care of me at that age," she says quietly, thinking back to her lonely middle and high school days.

Hop looks down at her with a knowing look, the two just looking into one another's eyes that reveal so much; regret and pain, but also love and lust. He leans down, their lips sweetly meeting in a chaste kiss. "I know I'm a little late, but maybe I can take care of you now?"

She gives him a sweet smirk before grabbing his hand and leading

him towards the grill to start brunch, “I don’t know if you noticed Hop,” she says playfully, “but you’ve been taking care of me for a few years now.”

Everyone’s up a half hour later, sitting around munching on fruit and sandwiches while chatting happily about the trip thus far. “Oh no, I think my favorite part of this trip was Dustin scraping his leg three-seconds into getting on the campsite,” Max says cheekily, watching the curly haired boy stick his tongue out at her. “Oh sue me, I’m not an agile skateboarder!”

Between the fun conversation and frantic eating of food, nobody noticed dark clouds invade the sky that had been bright and blue all week. A crack of thunder makes Lucas jump and look upwards before taking off and hiding in the tent, leaving the rest to start laughing hysterically.

“Wow,” Mike says, “your boyfriend sure is one tough guy.” With wide eyes, El nudges him but is relieved to see Max simply roll her eyes at the comment.

Joyce comes over to hurriedly discard the paper plates and cups while Hopper already has the large blue tarp guarded over the boy's waterproof tent. Everyone squishes in, besides the chief who runs to the van to pick up the few board games they had brought for this very possibility. He returns to see a spot next to Joyce, all of the kids smirking and giggling. Squinting his eyes playfully, he throws the Monopoly box down, causing the kids to groan.

“Oh shit,” Dustin says, “looks like we’ll be in here for hours.” Hopper nods, “neighbor said it’s gonna be like this all day, get comfortable kids,” he says before throwing a wink at Joyce and, of course, claiming the top hat as his game piece token.

## 12. New Friends

The next morning was sunny and clear, the ground muddy and damp from the ten solid hours of rain and wind the day prior. Everyone was up and feeling at ease, despite their stressful Monopoly escapades that kept them up until past midnight.

“No shit though, Hopper was definitely cheating last night!” Lucas says, remembering the thousands of dollars the man had acquired throughout the evening.

“He’s right,” Dustin agrees, “it’s obvious he’s corrupted his daughter into cheating for him!”

Eleven, who was sat next to the curly haired boy, harshly pokes his side. “No,” she says firmly, her eyebrows knitted together, “you’re just bad.”

Everyone bursts out laughing, Will high fiving the smirking girl before he goes over to Joyce and Hopper. “Hey guys,” he says softly, “need any help?”

Ruffling her son's hair, Joyce shakes her head, “think we’re about done, I always have to spend extra time cleaning up you know whose area,” she says mockingly, squinting her eyes at the one particularly messy culprit.

Will lets out a cute chuckle before watching his mom go over to the picnic table where his friends are still smiling and laughing. There’s an awkward silence between him and Hopper, Will still looking towards the picnic table while Hopper unconsciously cracks his knuckles.

“So,” the chief says reluctantly, “what are you guys gonna do today? There are only a few days left.”

Turning his head to make eye-contact with the man, the small boy shrugs his shoulders. “I’m not sure, maybe go to the lake.”

“Yeah, it’s really nice today after all that rain,” he responds before

internally cursing at himself for bringing up the damn weather.

It takes a few awkward moments of silence for Will to build up the courage despite his slight uncomfortableness. "Look, Hopper, I've always liked you and I know you were there for my mom when I was gone," he says quietly, "but...please, don't hurt her."

Hopper's heart soared at the love this teenager had for his mother. He doesn't know how many 14-year-old boys would approach the man seen kissing and cuddling his mom, let alone express his feelings and warn him to not harm her.

"Don't worry kid," he reassures, "I could never hurt your mom." After a brief second, he adds, "did you know we went to high school together?"

The boy nods his head.

"I liked her back then too, she was so nice and different and unique," he smiles, remembering Joyce with her baggy pants and grungy makeup opposed to the 1960s pastel skirts and poofy dress trends most of the girls in their class were wearing. "But then she met your dad," he continues, "and I kinda...lost my chance so believe me, kid, I don't plan on messing this up."

He gives Will a reassuring nod with a look the boy detected as genuine. "Okay, good," Will says with a sweet smile, already accepting of the chief. Hopper throws his arm around the much smaller boy before meeting everyone at the picnic table a few yards away.

Max had just been observing her surroundings, never have been camping before, or on any family vacation for that matter, when she noticed a group of kids around their age by the lake. Will had come back with Hopper and caught sight of Max's discovery, ecstatic to finally see some people around their age.

"Guys! Look, we can finally make some friends!"

The red-head girl somewhat deflated. It's not like she was antisocial, she didn't mind meeting other people. It just took some time for her



to warm up to people, whether it be kids around her own age or even a parent. She did, however, consider Eleven, Lucas, Mike, Dustin, and Will the people she was most comfortable with so maybe, with them around her, this wouldn't be a complete disaster.

Everyone changed into their swimsuits and walked down to the lake. The other group consisted of three girls and three boys. The two blonde girls were definitely related, a closer look revealed them to probably be twins with their matching green eyes and light dusting of freckles. The third girl was darker, obviously tanned from the sun with long black hair and brown eyes. She was playing volleyball with the three boys; a tall goofy-looking redhead, brown-haired one probably not much taller than Will and El, the shortest ones in the party, and then a blonde boy with glasses.

The volleyball had hit Lucas in the foot, with a shout of "sorry!" from a few feet away. He and Will went over to introduce themselves while Mike, El, and Max watched from a few feet away. Max was about to talk to Mike and El when she noticed Dustin was missing.

"Where'd Dusty go?" she asked, using the nickname they all make fun of him for.

"One guess," Mike says, rolling his eyes in the direction of the two blondes.

"Of course," Max says, shaking her head while stifling a laugh at the fearless boy sitting down in between the giggling sisters. El sees Will flag them over and the three walk towards the smiling strangers.

"Guys, this is Kimberly, Jason, Chris, and Brian. New guys, this is Mike, El, and Max."

Noticing that they're missing a friend, Will looks around confused before Lucas interjects, "Dustin's over there harassing your other friends, they'll be over here screaming in fear any moment now."

Everyone lets out a laugh and Kimberly playfully hits his arm before answering him with a smile, "that's Amanda and Angela, they're super nice, I'm sure they don't mind."

Max's eyes zoom in on the girl's hand, still resting on Lucas's arm, and makes a quiet noise of disapproval. El hears it and looks next to her to see Max's face, then looks at the stranger's arm on Lucas, and stifles a giggle. Finding her friends jealously funny, but still needing to back her up, El turns her face to rest on Mike's arm and looks away from the group.

A few seconds later, the white ball smacks Kimberly in the leg. "Ow!" the girl says, her hands going to the red spot on her thigh, "what the hell, Brian!" she yells towards the red-head.

"I didn't do shit! Why are yelling at me!" "Oh what, the ball just magically hit me?"

Mike looks over to see El with the tiniest bit of blood under her nose, biting his lip to hide his smile before rubbing it away with his thumb and wiping the red liquid on to his shirt.

Rolling his eyes at his friends, Jason addresses the party, "you guys wanna join our game? It'll be a little uneven, but I think we can take you." Lucas shrugs, "I'll join you guys," never the one to make a competitive sport unfair.

El's only played a little bit of volleyball, her first time being on this trip, so when she's first to serve she misses and hears a chuckle from the other side of the team. She looks over to see the girl with the black hair giggling and she turns her head to the side, confused as to why the girl would laugh at her for making a simple mistake.

Max feels herself grow angry, now really not liking this new 'friend' of theirs. She's about to say something before she sees Mike look at her and shake his head, mouthing "don't."

He picks up the ball and gives it to El with a reassuring smile, "it's okay El, try again but this time, try throwing it up and hitting it with your palm." Nodding, El follows her boyfriend's instructions and perfectly serves the ball, it easily bouncing back and forth between the two teams.

Mike and the girls end up losing, shrugging off the loss and responding with "good game" to the other team. Dustin comes over

with the two blondes who introduce themselves to El, Mike, Lucas, and Max, who already gets a better feeling about them than Kimberly.

“Your friend Dustin is so funny!” Angela shrieks happily, “he really is!” the other sister interjects, “he was showing us all of his ‘battle scars’ from this trip,” Amanda says, throwing up finger quotes.

Everyone chuckles and decides to play in the lake. El notices Max lingering back and lets go of Mike’s hand to wait with her. “Are you okay?” El asks, quietly.

“I’m telling you, El, that Kimberly girl sucks.” El shrugs, unsure of what to make of the girl. She’s smiley with a sweet tone, but it seems to be a different kind of smile than the ones of the twins.

“Quit being so nice El, she totally laughed at you when you missed the ball! I was gonna go over and kick her ass but your dumb boyfriend told me not too.” Giggling at her friend, she takes her hand and tries to drag her towards the lake.

“Let’s just have fun, we’re leaving soon!” Despite herself, Max smiles and allows her friend to drag her towards the cold water.

Everyone’s in a circle chatting causally and occasionally getting into splash fights. El is talking to Amanda and Angela about the latest episode of General Hospital, overjoyed at the fact there’s not only one, but two other 14-year-olds that watch soap operas. Max is standing aside, occasionally throwing in her opinion on the few characters she knows from El’s weekly updates.

Out of nowhere, she feels someone pull her leg from under her and screams before her head slips under water. Jumping up and frantically wiping at her eyes, she’s met with Lucas who’s sporting a wide smile. “You asshole!” she yelled, “you scared the shit out of me!” Not being able to help himself, he laughs and sends her a smirk, “sorry Madmax, I couldn’t help myself.”

She feels him take her slightly pruned hand in his under water and she looks at him with wide eyes, slightly confused but also excited. Sending him a smile, she squeezes his hand before dunking his head

under water. They both end up laughing and splashing each other before Kimberly swims over to them.

“Aw, you guys look like you’re having so much fun over here!” Sending her a glare, Lucas scoffs, “yeah, we were” he says, putting emphasis on the we.

Max smirks before sizing her up, still pissed at her for laughing at El and grabbing her boyfriend’s arm before.

Max feels her mind blank at the fact she just called Lucas her boyfriend. Shaking her dazed head, she gives the girl a pained smile that more so looks like a grimace. There’s a weird silence between the three until El and the twins come over, still happily chatting away. Mike, Will, Dustin, and the three other boys come over and they all decide to get out due to their slightly red faces and pruned hands and toes.

While drying off on shore, the quiet blonde invites the party over to their campsite set up for dinner. “Does everyone like sloppy joes?” Nodding, the teens decide to meet at eight o’clock and part ways.

Well, most of them part ways; El notices Will and the blonde, Christopher, still talking and she sees a shy smile come from her friend. Biting her lip to hide her smirk, she runs to catch up with Mike and the rest of the group.

Will rejoins the group a few minutes later and they all start to get ready for what Max hopes is an uneventful night.

### 13. Truth or Dare?

8:00 rolled around and Mike, El, Max, Lucas, Dustin, and Will made the trek over to the other campsite set up less than a mile away. Joyce and Hopper were overjoyed that the kids had been able to meet others around their age and befriend them. Joyce pulled Will aside before they were leaving, reminding him to be careful and to stay with his group at all times before kissing his head and waving goodbye to the rest of the group.

“Guys, I’m serious,” Dustin deadpans, “the twins dig me.” There was a mixture of laughter from the girls and Will and faces of disgust from Lucas and Mike. “You’re delusional,” Lucas remarks with a pinched face. “Maybe not delusional,” Mike says apprehensively, “just...confused.”

“Screw you assholes, they do! If anyone’s delusional here, it’s that Kimberly girl for having interest in you,” he says while sticking his finger in Lucas’s face. El feels Max stiffen next to her, shooting her a reassuring smile.

“What are you talking about? No, she doesn’t!” Lucas says defensively.

“She totally does, she kept looking at you and smiling and touching your arm,” the observant boy says, “little does she know...” he trails off, looking at Max, then back at Lucas, at Max, then back at him.

Mike lets out a snort, causing El to elbow him in the side. By this time, the redhead’s cheeks match the color of her hair and she’s shooting dagger at Dustin.

“Fuck off already, Dustin,” Lucas says, annoyed, “just keep imagining those two twins actually like you.” Mike, sensing there’s about to be tension between his hot-tempered friend and Dustin, goes in between the two boys to calm them down, “could you two just calm down, we’re supposed to be having fun...” Max, El, and Will hear his voice fade out as they walk a little bit ahead.

Max’s face finally returned to her normal pale color, shaking her head

at Dustin's antics. "I really can't deal with him sometimes." El and Will both chuckle, giving a nod of agreement.

"He means well though," Will says kindly, "he knows Lucas likes you a lot, we all kind of did." Max lets out a laugh, "wow I'm glad everyone did but me!" she says, narrowing her eyes at El.

The accused girl lets out a giggle and an innocent shrug. "Aren't you glad I played matchmaker?" she asked innocently.

Rolling her eyes playfully, Max nods. "I suppose," she says, trying to sound indifferent but her huge smile says otherwise. They eventually meet up with the other boys, Max squeezing her way between Lucas and Dustin, who are now back to joking good-naturedly together.

El took this time to talk with Will. "I saw how you smiled at Chris before," she says quietly. His face red, he makes eye contact with El. "He's really nice and funny and...I think he's like me." El simply nods, leaving the two friends in a comfortable silence

There really was never a conversation within the group about Will's sexuality; they were still so pure and young that it never needed to be discussed. The boy knows his loyal friends won't care, but it's also not something he feels comfortable broadcasting as of yet. El had only noticed due to their silent but evident bond. Hopper had taught her the word gay, wanting her to be aware and open since she'd be starting high school at some point.

It was a few weeks after that El had joined the boys at the arcade, where Will had a crush on one of the regular players. He never approached him, would only shyly look away when the boy did catch his gaze and once, Will had bumped into him and got out a strangled "sorry," before speed walking away with a red face. He and El exchanged a look, him giving an almost undetectable nod with fear in his eyes. He almost started to cry when the telekinetic teen simply went over and hugged him. After pulling back, she gave him a sweet smile and dragged him over to play Pac-Man, not a single word exchanged.

A few moments pass before Will lets out a chuckle, "you seriously are playing matchmaker this whole trip, Eleven!"

Mike looks back to see his girlfriend and his best friend laughing quietly together, feeling himself smile softly at the sight. He was so happy when they finally met and became friends, knowing they'd get along flawlessly. El meets his gaze and gives him that smile where her eyes light up and he can't help but go over and grab her hand.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything," Mike says to them. Will shakes his head, "nope we're just talking about our new friends," he says honestly, "do you like them?" Mike nods his head, "yeah, they're cool! The one guy is a little quiet, but he's really nice." Referring to Chris, Will nods and hope his cheeks remained the same shade.

The group arrives at the campsite to see the three boys helping a short woman with blonde hair pulled back in a bun set the picnic table. "Our friends are here!" Amanda screeches, running over happily.

She's about to hug El but pauses when she sees her worried face and hand clutch tighter around the freckled-faced boy's next to her. She inches back slightly and almost feels bad until she sees El give her a wide smile back.

"Hi, Amanda!" El says sweetly.

"Hey El, sorry if I scared you, I was just so excited to see you guys," she laughed out, "I've been stuck with those boys and Kim and my sister for three weeks, so it's fun to finally meet other people," she rambles.

El smiles and nods but Will looks at her with wide eyes. "You guys have been here for three weeks?" Nodding her head eagerly, she brings the group over whilst giving Will a rundown of their extended trip.

"Hey, guys!" Jason says, walking over to greet the group, "Chris's mom just finished making the food!"

Everyone walks over and squeezes onto the bench; Will, Chris, Jason, Dustin, Brian and Kim on one side with Mike, El, Amanda, Angela, Lucas, and Max on the other. The blonde woman comes over and warmly greets them.

“Hi everyone, I’m Lucy, Chris’s mom! I hope this is good with everyone,” she says with a smile. The boys and Max and El nod, politely thanking her before she goes to sit at another table with two other parents.

“Okay, okay,” Dustin says after the kids finish eating, “would you rather be forced to eat only wet cat food for a year or only change your underwear once a month?” Kimberly gives him a look of disgust, “this is literally the grossest game I’ve ever played!” the girl complained.

Rolling her eyes, Max interjects, “I’d take the cat food!” Her response causes Lucas to give her a high five, “same! See Dustin, any sane person would pick the cat food.”

“YOU people are nuts!” the curly-haired boy exclaims, “I accidentally ate Mew’s food once and I almost died!” Brian gives a nod toward Dustin, “I agree, definitely the underwear!” he says giving him a fist bump, “the smell of cat food makes me wanna puke!”

Will noticed Christopher cleaning the plates and napkins, quietly getting up from the table. “Need any help? he asks shyly.

The blonde boy meets his gaze and gives him a sweet smile, “sure, thanks.”

They bring the trash over to the garbage near the grill in silence before Chris breaks it, “so are your friends always that...crazy?” Giving a giggle, he nods “yeah, kind of! You haven’t even seen the worst of Dustin and Lucas.”

The two sit on the ledge between the grill and table where there are remnants of canned food and extra plates. “So where are you guys from again?” the blonde asks casually. “Hawkins. It’s like four hours from here, how about you guys?”

Will finds out the boy lives just outside Indianapolis and is on the swim team. He’s one of four, his other siblings all female. “I’m closest to my oldest sister who just started college in New York,” he says with a hint of sadness, “I’m gonna miss her.” Nodding, Will agrees. “My brother just left for college too.”



El looks back at Will and Chris quietly talking, letting out a smile when she sees them unconsciously lean in to speak to each other. Turning away from the boys, she leans her head on Mike's arm and he looks down, the usual soft look on his face when he looks at her.

"You havin' fun, El?" he asks softly. She looks up to nod at him before noticing the look in his eyes and places a kiss on his cheek.

"I am, this is...entertaining," she says, showing off her vocabulary. Mike smirks and is about to respond when Dustin groans loudly, interrupting them. "Can you two love bird assholes stop for one damn second, we're gonna play truth or dare!"

Angela calls Will and Chris over to sit around the fire, Amanda deciding she'll go first. "Hmmm, ok Mike, truth or dare?" she asks. "Truth," he says.

It's like she didn't even have to think before she blurted out, "when did you know you were in love with El?"

Everyone in the party's eyes grow wide, Lucas letting out a high pitched cackle. "Oh my god, Angela!" Amanda yells, "that's so personal, stop it!"

"Oh please," she waves her sister off, "it's so obvious and I'm just curious because they constantly look like an old married couple."

Mike's face by now is beat red and El is restraining a laugh, looking at her boyfriend with a pointed look. "I don't know! I didn't happen to write the exact moment down!" Mike says, already regretting this.

"C'mon Mikey, we're all dying to know," Dustin says, batting his eyelashes mockingly causing Brian and Jason to let out a chuckle.

Rolling his eyes and flipping his friend off, he's about to tell them to fuck off before he sees El's big brown eyes staring up at him in curiosity. Letting out a groan, he hesitates before choosing his words carefully.

"She briefly... moved away last year and it was the worst time of my life," he says quietly, staring into the blazing fire, "I was so sad and angry and just generally really depressing to be around, you can ask

them,” he says before the three boys nod in agreement, even Max butting in with “oh yeah, he was such a dick!”

Giving her a flat look, he hesitantly continues, “but then she came back and everything just felt right again, I guess...” he turns to look at El who’s looking at him with unshed tears, any memories of that year difficult for both of them.

He takes his hand in hers and squeezes it gently, pulling her into his side. Before he goes on to say something cheesy enough to make the guys torment him for the rest of his life, he shakes his head. “Someone else go,” he demands.

Letting out a snort, Chris is next daring Dustin to see how many large marshmallows he can fit in his mouth. “You’ve dared the right guy young sir,” he says dramatically before snatching the unopened bag of marshmallows.

Just as he’s about to place the seventh marshmallow in his mouth, he chokes on that had moved and they all spew out of his mouth causing everyone to laugh and shriek in disgust. “What the hell!” Lucas yelps, “you’re such a pussy now!”

Throwing the uneaten gelatin-like substance at his friend, he looks at him with narrowed eyes. “Shut up, I was gonna choke!”

The group goes back and forth with some truths about most embarrassing moments and a dare involving a three-minute headstand before it’s Kimberly’s turn. Her dark hair in a ponytail, she looks at Lucas. “Truth or dare, Lucas?” she asks with a smirk.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, he says “dare.” Nodding her head, as if she approves of his choice, she says, “I dare you to kiss me.”

Everyone’s taken back, Dustin and Mike trying their hardest not to burst out into laughter, Amanda and Angela looking at each other with looks of confusion, and El immediately looking for Max’s reaction. The fuming red-head shoots her head towards Kim and she doesn’t miss the way the girl’s eyebrows shoot up, challenging her.

“I have a better dare,” Max says sassily, “I dare you to stop giving us

your fake smiles and dirty looks and to stop laughing at my best friend who's the sweetest person you'll ever meet, oh, and I really dare you to stop trying to get with MY boyfriend."

She doesn't even realize what she said until she sees Lucas look at her with a confused expression and hears El let out a little gasp. She shoots Kimberly one more menacing look before shooting up and away from the group, El soon following.

There are a few moments of awkward silence before Brian says, "wow...well, this is really fun!" Kim hits him arm before looking at Lucas who sees his face of confusion. "Is she not even your girlfriend?" she asks.

Looking her straight in the eyes, he simply shrugs and says, "not yet," before quickly getting up and running off in the direction of the two girls.

## 14. (Second) Worst Couple

El found Max sitting on a bench overlooking the campsite, her back towards the colorful tents and fire pits. She quietly sat down next to her only girlfriend, putting her arm around her shoulder. Max tensed at first from the affectionate touch, but eventually leaned into her and wiped the frustrated tears from the other side of her face. They sat in silence before Eleven hears Max's strained voice.

"I fucked up again El," Max says, "I can't believe I called him my boyfriend! What is wrong with me!" The brown haired girl shoots her a sympathetic smile before shaking her head, "But he likes you, Max. You went on a date and you kissed."

Eyes wide, she feels the blood rush to her cheeks. "I...didn't think anyone saw that," she says, slightly embarrassed, "but that doesn't mean I can call him my boyfriend!" Throwing her face into her hands, she groans and El looks at her, confused by her uncharacteristic dramatic behavior before she sees Lucas walking towards them.

Poking Max's side gently, she whispers "turn around." Doing so with her heart in her chest, Max feels her eyes grow wide and she's sent into another panic.

She shoots around and grabs El's hand, "stop him! It's gonna be so embarrassing!" she whisper-yells in her face. Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, El shakes her head. "Be quiet and talk to him, you're being...crazy," she says with a smirk and her red-head friend narrows her eyes at her.

"I'll be right over there," El says, pointing a few feet away from the main entrance.

Squeezing her hand and scurrying off, she passes Lucas and shoots him a knowing smile, met with a sheepish look from Lucas. He slowly walks up to Max, who still looks slightly flustered but is sitting more confidently than a minute ago.

"Hi," he says with a small smile. Biting her lip, she nods at him. "Hi."

He sits down next to her and notices her hand tightly gripping the red wooden bench. "Are you okay?" he asks.

Groaning, she shakes her head. "I feel so stupid...she was just making me so angry from before and then I just..." she pauses and lets out a deep sigh, "didn't like her stupid dare." Not being able to help the big grin that appears on his face, he lets out a chuckle. Her head snaps to the side he's sitting on and she can't believe he's laughing at her.

"Are you laughing at me?" she says, sounding outraged.

"I just...didn't peg you as the jealous type," he says smugly.

Rolling her eyes, she gets up to walk away before he pulls her hand back down. "Oh calm down, Max, it was a joke."

She looks into his eyes, trying to decipher how on Earth he's feeling. She's pleasantly surprised when his dark eyes reflect humor and a certain kind of softness opposed to confusion and distaste.

"I was gonna ask you eventually, on our second date back in Hawkins," he shrugs, "but if you're just dying to claim me as yours...." he says playfully, nudging her arm.

There's a few moments of silence before she throws her arms up, "well, I don't hear you saying anything either!" Letting out another cackle, he quickly leans in and his lips meet hers. She doesn't automatically respond, shocked by the move before she slightly puckers her lips. This kiss is longer and less awkward, the right amount of pressure causing him to place his hand on her neck and deepen it before pulling away.

"So what do you say Madmax, will you be my girlfriend?" Biting her bottom lip to hide her smile, she nods. "I guess so, stalker. He slides his hand down to hers, the two intertwining their cold hands. She leans her head on his shoulder and closes her eyes contently, her feelings of embarrassment quickly replaced with a warm feeling in her chest.

El had met back with the group when she saw the two kiss, wanting them to have their privacy for the moment she knew was gonna

happen. She sees Mike's eyes widen at her presence, relief shooting through him before getting up and jogging towards her. "Is she good?" he asks, concerned for the red-head.

Nodding, El looks up at her boyfriend, "yeah, they were kissing," she says softly, placing a finger over her lips in a 'shh' gesture. Letting out a soft chuckle and a nod, he throws his arm around her and they walk back to the fire where the boys had started up the previous game of would you rather.

"Would you rather eat a potato and feel the pain of every bite... or BE a potato," Brian says, wiggling his eyebrows. Mike, Dustin, and El have never heard the laugh that just erupted from Will, who was hunched over in tears. Chris laughs along too, used to his odd friend but more so laughing at Will's reaction.

"Brian, how the fuck did you even think of that?" Jason asked, shaking his head. "I don't know," the boy shrugs, "all I know is, I'd definitely be a potato."

"Did he ask that weird question about feeling a potato's pain?" Amanda asks, her, Angela, and a sheepish-looking Kim returning to the group. They had left shortly after Lucas, the two twins taking their friend off to the side to set her straight. They had noticed how weird she was being the second their new friends had introduced themselves this morning, only worsening throughout the day.

"Oh shut up Amanda," Brian says, "Will over here happened to love my question!" "Please," Angela says, "he's just too damn nice to tell you what how stupid it is....almost as stupid as you picking to actually be a potato!"

El is giggling into Mike's side before she sees Lucas and Max join the group again, not holding hands but sides pressed together closely.

"Hey guys," Jason says chipperly, "let me ask, would you ever wanna be a potato?"

They both raise their eyebrows in confusion before Kimberly looks at Max. "Can I talk to you for a second?" the black-haired girl asks. Narrowing her eyes, the red-head is about to reject the offer before

she sees El give her a quick nod. "Fine," she says.

They walk over to the ledge by the grill and just stare at one another. "Look," Kim starts off, "I'm sorry. I get really...weird around people I don't know," she says looking at the ground. "I guess I just don't know how to try and befriend them so I become mean." She lets out a humorless laugh, shaking her head, "that sounds so dumb, I guess I'm just--"

"I get it," Max cuts her off, "I'm the same way, El just makes it easier to control," she says.

Nodding her head, Kim plays with the rock under her sneakers, "so we're good? I don't know how much longer you guys are here, but I know my friends definitely wanna hang out with you again and I just wanna be...okay."

Max nods her head, "yeah, we're good....thanks for apologizing," she says quietly.

They exchanged shy smiles before there's an awkward silence. "Also, I wouldn't have kissed Lucas," Kimberly blurts out, "I just knew you liked him." Letting out a chuckle, Max shakes her head, "apparently everyone does!"

The two girls rejoin the group and they sit around the fire a bit longer before Chris's mom comes over. "It's pretty late you guys," she says softly, "you're more than welcome to come back over tomorrow for breakfast!"

While the rest of the party says goodbye, Will lingers back to stay with Chris. "Maybe we'll see you guys tomorrow," he says hopefully. The blonde smiles at him and nods, "yeah, maybe," he says before quickly hugging Will, his arms going around the boy's skinny neck.

Will stands there, slightly stiff and shocked before Chris pulls away with a smirk. "Night, Will," he says. The boy lets out a big smile of his own before saying, "night, Chris," practically skipping back to catch up with his friends, waving goodbye to the others.

The party returns back to the campsite to see Joyce and Hopper laid

out on a blanket, looking at the stars. El sneaks over and looks down at them, noticing Hopper's eyes closed with a sleeping Joyce resting on his big chest.

"Hello," she says looming over him. His eyes pop open and he almost jumps, before feeling the weight of Joyce on him. "Jesus kid, you scared the hell out of me!" El looks down at Joyce, then up at the sky, "I'm glad you tried it," she says cheekily before skipping off to her tent to change into her pajamas.

Hop lets out a quiet chuckle at his daughter before quietly waking Joyce with a kiss on the temple, "kids are back," he mumbles, "let's go to bed." She stretches her arms out before sitting up and looking at Will, who's smiling widely at Lucas and Max, the pair holding hands. Joyce lets out a smile herself, her heart swelling at the happiness this trip has brought them so far.

The kids are all standing outside their tents, dressed in pajamas and about to part ways. Lucas and Max are facing each other, her telling him about Kim's apology and how it seemed kind of genuine. "That's good, no more stealing your boyfriend!" Lucas says, mimicking Max's voice at the end causing her to let out a chuckle. "Shut up!" she says, smacking his arm.

"Jesus Christ," Dustin says exasperatedly, "You guys are the worst, I can't take all of these teenage hormones!" Everyone looks to the side to see El resting her chin on Mike's chest, his arms around her while she's looking up at him with a smile similar to the light in his eyes.

"Hm, okay," the curly-haired boy rethinks, "the second worst!"



## 15. To Be Nice

The crisp morning air surrounded the five pajama wearing teens standing outside the boy's tents, deciding what to do for breakfast. Joyce and Hopper were already dressed and preparing bacon and eggs, but Will really wanted to take up Chris's mom on the breakfast offer; to be nice, of course.

"Guys, she invited us! We should go!" Will said kindly, but adamantly. El threw him a smirk, causing him to blush and avert his gaze.

"I'm fine with whatever!" Dustin says, "just as long as I eat soon!" Mike shrugs, not caring one way or another either. "You good with that Max?" the freckled-faced boy asks, "or are you gonna try to fight Kimberly again?"

Rolling her eyes, she flips him off. "Shut up Wheeler, me and her are fine now so I don't care."

"Yeah, because now I'm her man," Lucas says, shimmying his shoulders causing the whole group to burst out in laughter, besides Max who rolls her eyes and elbows him in the arm.

The group eventually decides to get dressed and make the same hike as yesterday to meet the other teens. "More for us!" the chief says excitedly. Joyce lets out a chuckle and nods, "I'm glad they made friends here," she says while leaning against the side of the table.

Hopper moves from his place near the grill and traps her much smaller body against his. "I'm glad they've been out of our hair," he mumbles into her ear, "more time for..." Smacking his stomach lightly, she leans up on her tippy toes to press a kiss to his lips.

"Quiet," she mumbles against them, feeling him smile into it. He pulls away to kiss down her neck, his body slightly moving off of hers giving her a chance to free herself.

"I don't think so Hop," she says dismissively, "we have to start packing our stuff up!" Nodding, he looks down at her; the lust that

was over him just moments ago replaced with a soft look of concern, “you sad about leaving tomorrow?” he asks curiously.

Shrugging her shoulders, she tilts her head to the side. “Not really, this one was of my favorite trips here and I’ve had so much fun,” she says, “but I think I’m ready to go back to home with everyone,” she says sweetly.

Nodding, he gives her a sly smile. “I can hear it now,” he says dramatically, “Joyce Byers and that asshole sheriff go camping with a bunch of kids, come back an item!” She throws her head back in laughter, the sun radiating off her slightly-tanned face and Hopper has never felt luckier.

“All I’m saying is I’m surprised one of the twins hasn’t kissed me by now,” Dustin says with the utmost honesty in his voice. Max looks at him in disgust, baffled by what she’s hearing. “And why on Earth would that surprise you?” she asks, her voice getting higher with every word.

“The electricity....you guys know what I’m talking about, right?” Dustin asks slyly.

He had developed a weird, unexpected friendship with Steve Harrington after he and the older boy both sat in the Wheeler’s living room waiting on Karen and Ted to figure out where their children were. Ever since then they hung out a few times, Dustin introducing Steve to a few arcade games and Steve sharing his wide array of experiences and girl advice.

Despite the fact he got dumped for Will’s ‘weird brother’, he’s still positive the guy knows what he’s talking about.

“Oh god, not again,” Mike groaned, “is this more bullshit from Steve?” Eyes wide due to the insult towards Steve, he defends his honor. “It is not bullshit, Michael!” he protests, “I’m telling you the electricity is real.”

Rolling his eyes, Mike is grateful when he sees the red tents Chris and his friends are residing in. Once again, Amanda is the first to spot them and enthusiastically waves them over.

"I told you they'd come!" she shouts at her sister who just pushes her away. "Hi Dustin!" she says with a sweet smile, "we made extra food for all of you!"

"YES!" he exclaims, "I'm starving, you guys are too kind," he says before turning around to face his group and raises his eyebrows as an 'I told you so!' They shake their head, disregarding their friend who's running over to the buffet-style table.

"We're glad you guys came!" Jason says who also walks over to greet them, "we're only here for a few more days." Will nods, "we're leaving tomorrow so we had to see you guys again," he says with a faint blush. Giving him a smirk that slightly unsettles him, a smirk that maybe means he knows too much, he nods.

"Well, let's go before Dustin gets it all!"

Once again, when everyone's done eating, Will and Chris offer to clean up while the rest relax on several blankets sprawled across the ground. They silently begin to clear the table, Will taking the cups and napkins, Chris stacking the plates on top of one another. The blonde follows the short boy to the garbage where he finally speaks.

"I'm happy you guys came back," he says honestly, "I wasn't sure if you would be able too." Will drops his trash in the metal garbage can, unsettled by how close the boy is standing behind him.

He turns around and lets out a nervous chuckle, "oh yeah, we're just leaving tomorrow so I...we wanted to see you guys again." He groans internally at his slip up. Chris smirks at him, raising his eyebrow playfully, "right."

He reaches around Will's body to throw out the trash, his arm accidentally gliding against his side when he brings his now empty hands back. They only stare at each other for a few seconds before Will's gaze focuses on the teens behind them, unfamiliar and intimidated by the look in Chris's blue eyes.

"How 'bout we go see what they wanna do for your last day?" Chris asks, sensing Will's shyness. His gaze meets the blondes again and he nods his head slowly, capturing the different shades of blue and

green before he squeaks out an “okay.”

“Do you guys wanna go back to the lake?” Brian suggests, “it’s too damn hot for that demonic hike.” The group agrees, despite Angela rolling her eyes at her friend’s dramatic attitude.

“You know, it wasn’t even that bad of a hike. More like, a leisurely trail.”

Dustin makes a noise of protest, sticking his finger up matter of factly. “I’ll have you know I broke my leg on that trail you call a walk in the park!”

El lets out a snort, calling her friend out immediately. “You had a scrape Dustin, it was this big,” she says, her thumb and pointer finger only millimeters apart. The group all laughs at her comment, noticing her quiet ways over the past few days and pleasantly surprised she’s making jokes around them now.

They all disperse to get into their swimsuits while the party goes back to their site to change, deciding to just meet at the lake since it’s only a few yards from them. El and Will trail behind, the rest still laughing at Dustin’s belief that one of the twins likes him.

“So,” El says already with a smirk, “did you enjoy breakfast?” Eyes wide, Will thinks back to how flustered he was.

“Oh god, El, don’t even! I was so dumb!” Letting out a giggle, she turns her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I kept stuttering and couldn’t even look at him!” Will confuses, “he was just so close to me! And he kept looking at me like... I don’t know! I’ve never had that happen before so it’s just...” he says, letting out a sigh at the end.

El puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder, halting them from walking. “He’s nice, Will,” she says genuinely, “I don’t think he thought you were dumb.”

The boy just shrugs before looking at El’s concerned expression and he can’t help but smile back. He takes a deep breath before nodding, “you’re right, he is nice.” El smiles back at him before grabbing his

hand and running up to meet the group.

She lets go of Will's hand and daringly jumps on Mike's back, legs wrapping around his waist and arms around his shoulders. Mike had heard the footsteps and, by some miracle, was in a sturdy enough position for him to only slightly fall forward when he felt the impact of her body.

"That was so lucky, El!" he exclaims with a laugh, "I totally could've dropped you!"

"But you didn't!" she said happily, leaning her head over his shoulder to kiss his cheek. Lucas and Dustin let out disgusted groans, Lucas still not keen on public displays of affection.

"This would've been much less nauseating if Mike just fell on his ass," Dustin says, everyone agreeing but a blushing Mike and a smiley Eleven.

The sun is hot and beating down on the campsite by the time they all meet at the beach, eager to be refreshed by the cool lake water. The boys decide to play a game of volleyball, unfazed by the heat when it comes to a "country versus city boys" showdown.

The girls shrug before taking off their t-shirts and shorts, feeling relief when their lower bodies are surrounded by the cold.

"Finally!" Angela yelps, pushing her pink sunglasses into her messy blonde hair. "Once, I was tanning with these on and fell asleep so you could only imagine how awful it was!" Max and El let out laughs; they've both really come to love the quirky, peppiness of the twins - even Kim isn't being bad now since the apology.

"She's not kidding," the black-haired girl says, "it stayed like that all summer!"

Max notices Amanda watching the boys play volleyball, Dustin and Lucas currently fighting over the ball like two toddlers. She watches them with a smile and Max feels her eyes go wide.

She quickly turns to El and nods her head in the direction of the girl. El, with furrowed eyebrows, looks over and follows her gaze. Her

mouth visibly drops open and she giggles, before covering her mouth with her hand.

“Oh, so you guys finally noticed that my sister has taken a liking to Dust-“

She’s interrupted by a gush of water in her face, “ugh shut up Ang! I told you, I just think he’s funny,” she says defensively, “there’s not a lot of guys that are actually nice and funny.” Max nods, feeling the need to support Dustin.

“He really is, you should’ve seen him at our school dance last year,” she says, giggling at the memory, “he did his hair all crazy with some weird spray and we all thought it looked ridiculous, but he really pulled it off.”

El nodded before her face turned into a slight frown. “What’s wrong?” Angela asked, noticing her facial expression change. El shook her head, surprised her new friends had even noticed.

“Nothing, I just remember at the end of the night he was so upset because nobody wanted to dance with him,” she said, her heart hurting as she remembers the way he vented it out to the party after the dance. “But Mike’s older sister who was chaperoning danced with him in front of everyone,” Max informs them, “it was so cool of her.”

Their conversation is interrupted by the boys running in, Will, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin looking victorious. “We won of course!” Lucas says, discreetly taking Max’s hand under water. “Oh please,” Brian says, “it was so unfair with the extra player!”

“Excuses, excuses!” Dustin responds, his flailing arms splashing everyone before an idea pops into his head, “let’s play Chicken!” he exclaims.

The pool game started out peacefully but eventually led to dirty moves and unfair alliances that sent the group of twelve into a frenzy. The sun was a few hours from setting and everyone had started to get hungry, deciding to get out for dinner.

“I think my mom would want to make us dinner since it’s our last day

here,” Will says, “but do you guys wanna come back over here at 8? A good-bye party?” he says with a smile that couldn't be phonier

Chris nods his head eagerly, not giving his friends a chance to answer. “8:00! Sounds good,” he says with a smile. Will nods back and there are a few moments of silence before there's a choir of goodbyes from the others.

The party goes back up to change into dry clothes and sees a slightly frantic Joyce. “Hey guys, um, are your friends coming for dinner?” Will shakes his head, “no, they're going back to theirs to eat and then coming back later,” he informs his mom before adding on, “if that's okay.”

Joyce gives him a soft smile, “of course it is Will,” she says ruffling his wet hair, “go get dressed, Hop's almost done cooking.”

The boy nods before taking off towards the tents, feeling a strange mix of excitement and sadness for the last night at camp.

## 16. In The Air

"I have to say I'm a fan of you two," Dustin says, wiggling his pointer and middle finger to gesture towards Joyce and Hopper. After preparing dinner for everyone, they tiredly plopped down right next to each other, Joyce's arm leaning into the chief's side unknowingly.

Hopper raises his eyebrows, "that's good kid," he says dryly, "we've been dying for your approval." Will lets out a snort at the comment along with seeing his mom's slightly embarrassed face.

"There's something in the air here, I'm telling you," the curly-haired boy continues, "romance is everywhere! Everywhere! I'm disgusted!"

Lucas nudges him, "you're just mad 'cause you're not getting any" the boy says before sarcastically throwing in, "since, you know, neither of the twins are actually into you."

Max and El exchange a knowing look, remembering the way Amanda longingly stared at the boy now slapping Lucas's arm. They wouldn't dare tell him he was on to something though, knowing Dustin would take that knowledge and run with it; besides, it wasn't their place to out their new friend's secret, even for a member of the party.

Eleven and Hopper decide to clean up dinner while Joyce and the boys attempt to start the fire, nighttime falling quickly.

"So," Hop begins, "are you having fun?" Nodding eagerly, she gives him a big smile.

"Yes, a lot," she states, "thank you again for coming."

That was the only way he was allowing her to go. He knew it'd be a lot on Joyce to cook and clean and somewhat supervise the boisterous group of teens; he's also grown very protective over the girl he viewed as a daughter.

"Course kid," he says, trying to not get choked up, "it seemed to work out for me, didn't it?" he playfully says, nodding his head towards Joyce whose animatedly debating with Mike the best way to set the



fire up.

El gives him a smirk, "I knew it," she says before pausing to think for a second. She suddenly exclaims, "Jopper!"

She's met with her dad's confused expression and shakes her head with a roll of her brown eyes, "Joyce and Hopper, your ship name," she says as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

The man can't help but smile before shaking his head, feeling his heart swell at how truly happy and at peace El seems. She hears a loud laugh from Mike, her smiling brightening when she looks over at the group. The chief doesn't miss the softness in her eyes when she looks over or the dopey smile the lanky boy throws back at her, giving her a small wave.

"Go ahead kid," Jim says, "I got it." El smiles sweetly at him, shaking her head.

"No, I wanna help." Together, they clean off the table while El tells him about all of her favorite memories of the summer so far.

The fire is burning and the teens are sitting around warming their cold hands from the nighttime temperature drop. Joyce and Hopper decided to go down to the lake before heading into their tent, wanting to give the party some space on their last night. Will's telling them a story about his wretched history teacher before he sees the six familiar teens coming their way, his face brightening before completely forgetting about the story and jogging over to greet them.

"Hey guys!" he says cheerfully, "we're so happy you were able to...." His eyebrows are drawn together when he notices Amanda struggling to hold a giant black boombox, "...bring a boombox?" he says with a giggle.

Smiling wide, she does her best to showcase it without dropping it. "Cool, right?" she says happily, "I figured if it's a goodbye party, we'd need some music!"

Nodding his head, everyone goes ahead to greet the others leaving Will and Chris lingering back. "Hi," Will squeaks out, giving him a

shy smile. Chris smiles back, "hey."

The smaller boy bites his lip nervously, unsure of what to say, his nerves getting the best of him. "How was your last dinner here? I'm sure you're sick of burgers and hot dogs by now," the blonde says with a chuckle.

Will eases slightly at the sound of his laugh, nodding his head. "Yeah, it was nice. My mom has burned most of the stuff we ate here, she either burns stuff or it's not cooked long enough, but it's still been pretty good, not much different from home" he rambles, squeezing his lips together when he sees the teasing look on Chris's face.

"You're cute, Byers," he says, giving him an undetectable look before walking a few feet away to greet the others. Will just stands there, eyes wide trying not to pass out when he sees El give him a reassuring smile followed by a tiny nod. Taking a deep breath, he goes to join the rest of the group after getting the graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Dustin yells, snatching the items from Will and quickly popping a marshmallow on a stick and into the fire. "I love s'mores," Amanda and Angela identically squeal before doing the same.

Angela had her marshmallow just outside the flame while Amanda's was fully engulfed in the fire, burning in a matter of seconds. "Is it really a s'more if it's not burnt?" the twin says aloud. Dustin snaps his head to the side and his face lights up. "Exactly! Oh my god!"

Max resists the urge to snort, watching them bond over burnt marshmallows before Lucas plops down next to her. "Hey Madmax," he says, resting his warm hand on her denim covered leg.

She smiles at him sweetly, resisting the urge to kiss her smiling boyfriend. She still can't believe they're actually boyfriend and girlfriend and that she gets giddy whenever she thinks about the situation. She's brought out of her unfamiliar lovesick thoughts when she hears a cackling from Dustin and Amanda, them sharing a smile while eating their burnt marshmallows and chocolate.

"They're cute," Max says quietly to Lucas. He lets out a groan, "don't play into his fantasies!" She nudges him with a quiet giggle, "I think she might like him," she says, "me and El caught her staring at him before when you guys were playing volleyball."

Lucas looks over to see Amanda laughing at Dustin trying, but failing, to fit the rest of his giant s'more in his mouth. "Oh yeah," the boy says sarcastically, "he's a real catch." Max playfully pushes his arm with her hand before Lucas grabs it and pulls her into him, her head landing on his shoulder causing her frizzy red hair to brush against his jaw.

Soon enough, the whole group, aside from Amanda who's trying to get a signal from the boombox, is around the fire and sharing stories from their first year of high school. "It was the funniest shit," Brian insists, "every time she bent over, I would take out the whoopee cushion."

Jason bursts out into laughter at the memory, "she had no idea who was doing it and it took her three days before she finally realized." Brian nods proudly, getting up to bow. "The week of detention and a three-page essay was totally worth it."

Their laughs are cut short from Amanda's screech, "you guys! I finally got it!" She was able to get a signal from a local radio station, turning up the slightly crackled tune of 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World.'

Kimberly mockingly claps, "great job, it only took 30 minutes!" The blonde rolls her eyes, "oh shut up, it was almost impossible! We're like in the middle of nowhere!"

Three songs later and 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' is blaring through the speakers, causing the twins and Kimberly to shoot up and the boys to groan.

"NO!" Brian exclaims, "anything but this song!" Flipping him off, Kim runs over and grabs Max and El's hands, bringing them closer to the stereo to sing and dance with them.

"Oh, daddy dear, you know you're still number one," Amanda sings while flailing her arms, "but girls, they wanna have fun!" Angela

finishes, throwing her arms up and twirling around.

"They're obsessed with this song," Chris informs the group. Will, who's sitting beside him, lets out a laugh. "It is catchy," he shrugs before swaying back and forth.

Mike nods, agreeing. "Nancy played this shit all the time, I had no choice but to like it."

He looks over at the girls dancing, El flipping her short hair with Max and dancing poorly but wearing the biggest smile he's ever seen. He doesn't even realize he's also smiling while watching her until Lucas punches him in the arm.

"If I ever look that pathetic and in love, please hit me in the face." Mike just rolls his eyes and pushes him what he thought was light; it caused the boy to fall off the bench and everyone laughed but Mike who looked like a deer in headlights.

"You're fucked, Wheeler." Mike took off running, Dustin and Brian cheering on the fight. "They're so damn loud," Chris says, humor in his tone, "wanna go down to the lake for a little?" Will nods, feeling calm and confident as he accepts the offer.

They quietly leave the group and are standing a few feet away from the water, looking at the night sky when his panic sets in. His palms are clammy and his thoughts are scattered around in his head. He knows Chris is nice and has really come to like him, but he's going home tomorrow and he'll probably never see him again. Even if they were able to talk somehow, what would happen then?

"Will?" he hears the soft tone of Chris's voice. Shaking his head, he turns slightly to look at him. "Yeah?" he asks softly. Chris gestures to the ground, "let's sit."

They plop down on the cold dirt, their blue and black sneakers out in front of them. Chris leans back on his hands, looking up at the sky. "So, how long have you known?"

Will inhales sharply at the boy's boldness, "what do you mean?" The blonde turns to give him a pointed look, before answering his own

question.

"Kyle Hamilton, 5th grade," he says quietly, "I'd say that was my first crush and when I really knew."

Will takes a moment to process the confession before letting out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "I feel like everyone kind of realized before I even did," Will says hesitantly, "the bullies at school would call me a fairy and stuff and I'd hear my dad ask my mom if I was a fag," he said, briefly pausing.

Hurt laced in his voice and Chris cautiously put his arm around Will's shoulder, rubbing his thumb on the red fabric. "I mean, I knew I didn't like girls," he continued, "but I don't know, I guess I just never really thought about it," he finishes with a shrug.

Chris shakes his head, "your dad's an asshole," he says bluntly. Will lets out a snort, "yeah, I don't see him anymore." Chris nods, "good."

Will hesitantly leans his head on Chris and the blonde can't but smile at the gesture, finally feeling the boy relax against him. They talk quietly, cuddled against one another with the faint sound of music and laughter behind them.

"...And another one gone, and another one gone, another one bites the dust!" Brian yells from on top of his chair. "Oh my god, shut up you psycho!" Kimberly yells, half amused but her ears can't take anymore.

"Hey, I'm gonna get you too, another one bites the dust!" Dustin joins in, laughing at Kim's distressed expression.

"Okay, okay, we're done...for now," the curly-haired boy says mischievously.

The tune of Queen's song fades out only to be replaced by 'Every Breath You Take.' El, who was currently sitting with Max and the twins, feels her head immediately shoot towards Mike who's sitting across from her. He's already looking at her with a shy smile when she lets out a giggle, thinking back to the night they danced to it at the snowball.

She had been back for a month when Mike went over to Hop's trailer to ask him if he could take her; he had already asked Eleven two weeks prior and they were really hoping the chief would allow it. Surprisingly, him and El only needed to have a ten-minute stare down for him to sigh and begrudgingly agree, setting a 9:30 curfew to be outside the Hawkins Middle School gymnasium doors. They had awkwardly slow danced, stared into the one another's eyes, and even kissed, the very song playing through the campground now in the background.

Max, remembering that night very clearly, rolls her eyes. "Of course this song would be played," the red-head teases, "cue Mike and Eleven heart eyes," she says to Angela and Amanda. The girls giggle, letting out a loud "awww" when El sticks her tongue out and skips over to sit next to Mike.

"They really are so cute!" Angela says, feeling a tiny twinge of envy. Max nods, "and they're always like that," she says in disbelief, "I've never even seen them fight!"

Amanda has remained silent until then, watching Brian and Dustin talk off to the side. She takes a deep breath and nods determinedly, "I'm going for it, girls," she announces before standing up and going over.

She smiles up at Dustin and her red-headed friend. "Hey guys, Brian can you give us a second?" Brian smirks, "You know, I was here first Amanda and I think-"

He stops talking when he's met with her blank stare, causing him to chuckle and pat Dustin on the back before joining Max and the others around the fire. "Am I in trouble?" the curly-haired boy asks, raising his eyebrow.

Shaking her head, she purses her lips to the side. "Of course not! I was wondering if you wanted to dance."

Dustin feels confused at first, looking back to his if his friends are tricking him; but when he turns back to see her hopeful eyes and shy smile, his heart soars. He remembers how terrible he felt when he got rejected twice by the catty middle school girls at the snowball,

thankfully being saved by Nancy. He was really never interested in romantic moments with girls anyway, but he can't explain the feeling in his chest looking down at the fidgeting blonde.

"Oh, uh, yes, yeah, sure" he stutters out quickly, even remembering in his flustered state to step close to her and put his hands on her waist. She tries to hide her smile by biting her lip and they begin to sway back and forth in the middle of the campsite.

Max turns around and her eyes go wide, covering her mouth with her hand in shock. She quickly pulls Lucas's pant leg next to her and aggressively points behind her. Confused, he turns around and bursts out laughing.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," he says in between laughs. "I told you she liked him!" Max says, shoving her finger in his face. Rolling his eyes, he remembers something his dad said over breakfast one morning and chuckles, already relating to him.

"Yeah, yeah, you're never wrong, I get it," Lucas says.

Will and Chris are seen walking back from the lake together, a blush on Will's face that no one mentions. "Oh shit," Chris says when he comes into view and sees the dancing duo, "she finally made a move."

They all sit around the fire, Dustin and Amanda joining them shortly after with smiles plastered on their faces. They talk and laugh and joke until they're all yawning and, regretfully, announcing to call it a night. The girls are in a group hug, the twins and El's eyes watering as they grasp on to one another.

"I'm so sad," Angela wails, "you guys are the best!" While Kim's not on the verge of tears, she's looking at El and Max with a sad expression.

"I'm sorry I was such a dreadful bitch in the beginning," she laughs out, "you two are so cool." The girls remain hugging while Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Brian, and Jason say their final goodbyes with back pats and fist bumps.

The two other boys are standing off to the side when everyone's getting prepared to leave, Will looking down playing with a clump of

dirt under his shoe. "Hey," Chris says, "it's okay," the blonde says, moving in to hug him. Will returns it, leaning his forehead on his shoulder before hearing a soft voice in his ear.

They pull back both with huge smiles. Chris gives him one more wave before running to meet his friends who are only a few feet away. Will looks after him before running off to find a piece of paper and pen, repeating in his head, "317-614...."

The party's waving goodbye to the group when Chris runs past them to catch up, shouting a final "goodbye!" El smirks, knowing she'll need the details from Will tomorrow morning.

They all stand around in a circle, Lucas not being able to help himself when he blurts out, "okay, but no shit Dustin, how much did you pay Amanda to dance with you?"

Looking in shock, he shakes his head, "not a damn dime asshole! I told you, romance is in the air toni-"

He's cut off by a tap on the shoulder before Amanda kisses his cheek quickly, "sorry, forgot to do that," she says cheekily, leaving a flustered looking Dustin as she gives the last and final parting wave.

He turns around to face his friends, met with shocked looks. In true Dustin fashion, he gives them a cheeky smile before purring, causing everyone to groan.

"Not that shit again!"



## 17. Family Vacation

### Notes for the Chapter:

This is the last chapter of this story!

I'm unable to mark it as complete because my link for editing is broken, not sure why but I get an "error 500" message if any other users know what I'm talking about lol but anyway, this is now a complete story!

Thank you all so much for the kudos and comments, especially due to my rude and abrupt six-month hiatus, they're so greatly appreciated!

I'm also planning to start a new summer story similar to this one except there's a new location(s) and they're older. Thank you all again! <3

Morning came and everyone eventually made their way up and out of the tents, squeezing together on the picnic table. Joyce and Hop speak softly while cooking breakfast, the usual talkative teens tired from the early 8 am wake up call.

"It's such bullshit, why do we have to leave so early," Max grumbled, tiredly leaning her head against Lucas's side; they really were a perfect pair with their grumpy scowls and sour morning attitude.

"Really though," her boyfriend agrees before slightly perking up at the sight of bacon the chief slammed down on the table.

"Alright guys, after breakfast can you just pack your sleeping bags up?" Joyce asked sweetly, "Hop will take care of the tents this time."

She sensed not only their tiredness but sadness about leaving. Even though they'll see each other every day when they get back, there's just something about being together at the campsite that makes spending time together special; or at least she feels that way.

Hopper shoots her a look of distaste but it slowly vanishes when she raises an eyebrow playfully at him, a smile tugging at her lips. With a slight groan, he goes over to their tent to pack up their own sleeping

bags and disassembles the tent.

Dustin lets out a snort, "whipped!" he says, apparently loud enough for the retreating man to turn around and squint his eyes at him.

"Watch it, kid," he says, trying to sound threatening.

It would've gone over well, had El not giggled and nodded in agreement, "he's right, dad." This causes everyone to giggle besides an irritated-looking Hopper and a blushing Joyce.

The kids quietly finish up breakfast, Mike cleaning up everyone's dishes while the others get dressed and prepare to pack their bags. El and Will walk slowly towards the tent together, the brunette girl eager to get the details from her friend about last night.

"So, what happened with Chris last night?" she asked excitedly. Will immediately breaks out in a smile, looking at the ground in an attempt to hide it.

"He gave me his phone number," the boy informs her, "I didn't even say anything, I thought he just wanted to leave things the way they were, you know," he says, "but then while we were hugging goodbye, he told me and I thought I was gonna fall over looking for a paper and pen."

El giggles softly, wrapping her arm around her friend's shoulder. "I'm so happy for you, Will," she says, sincerity in her tone.

With a blush, Will slightly leans into the young girl, "I just hope we can stay friends, I really like him," he sighs.

El nods reassuringly, hoping it will all work out in the end. "You'll have to wait a long time before you can see him," she says quietly, "but it will be worth it." Her eyes travel to a certain lanky teen now standing in front of his tent, laughing at Dustin who had tripped on his long red sleeping bag.

Will notices her soft gaze and feels himself smile, quietly hoping to find a bond that could even try to rival what her and his best friend have. They meet up with the rest and quickly get their stuff together, seeing as Hopper's done with the first tent and charging over to

complete the rest.

Right on schedule, the van is packed and everyone is triple checking the area for anything they might have missed. The teens, Joyce, and Hopper stand where the tents had lain, overlooking the picnic table they sat at for every meal and lake they had frolicked in on the hot days.

The chief throws his arm around the mother of two, bringing her in close.

"We'll have to come back sometime," he mumbles against her hair, "maybe without the kids and in a cabin somewhere." Giggling, she pushes his side and nods her head, "maybe we will."

Dustin dramatically drops to his knees, shouting "GOODBYE!", interrupting the adult's conversation. His echoes are heard in the distance and everyone groans, still too grouchy from the early rise to find his antics amusing.

"Oh, my god!" Lucas grumbles, grabbing Dustin's shoulder and pulling him up, "why must you scream!" he yells, ironically screaming back.

Max separates the two, shoving them both in opposite directions. "We have a four-hour car ride back!" the girl exclaims, "if you two don't stop, I'll make Hopper kick you guys out of the moving car!"

Lucas looks at her insulted, "but....but I'm your boyfriend! How could you!" Rolling her eyes, she stomps off to the car and plops down in the middle row.

"Wow, I guess it's good we're leaving," the chief remarks, "since you're all about to kill each other!"

Mike shrugs, "it has been over a week of being together nonstop, it was bound to happen."

The burly man looks between the teen and El, standing close together and holding hands. "You two must be really done with it, then, yeah?" he smirks, looking down at their hands earning a little shove from Joyce.

"Oh stop it," she chides, "I think we're ready to get going."

The seating arrangements are the same as the ride going there, Lucas, Max, and Dustin in the middle row with Will, Eleven, and Mike in the third.

Lucas and Max had fallen asleep within 10 minutes of the ride, Lucas's head leaning against the window while the red-haired teen leaned on his shoulder, her legs curled up into her chest.

Dustin and Will watched out the window, the small roads lined with oak trees and fruit stands replaced for the practically empty highway; Mike and El spoke quietly in the backseat.

"Did you have a fun time, El?" he asked softly. Nodding eagerly, she started to gush about her favorite memories of the trip. Despite her one mishap with the random nightmare, every day and night was full of smiles and laughs and she couldn't be more grateful.

"You know what I thought was one of the funniest moments?" Mike asks. El turns her head to the side, waiting for his answer.

There's a pause before he blurts out, "when you fell off the hammock!"

El giggles uncontrollably at the memory of her falling flat on her butt, only pausing when she hears an undetectable groan up front. Covering her mouth, she looks up at Mike with a glint in her eye and he can't help but smile down at her.

"That kinda hurt," she said through muffled giggles.

"I'm sure, it was pretty crazy," Mike laughs out.

The look of Mike laughing and smiling at her causes her to abruptly lean up and place a kiss on his lips. He immediately responds back, tucking a piece of curly brown hair behind her ear.

They hear the driver's throat clear and Mike jumps away from his girlfriend, smacking his head on the window.

"Ow!"

Will looks further out the window to hide his laughter while it bubbles out of Dustin.

"Oh, my god! I didn't even witness that and it's the funniest shit I've ever seen."

Meanwhile, Hop has his hand on the steering wheel wearing the smuggest grin Joyce has ever seen. He feels a slap on his arm and quickly looks over at Joyce. "What was that for?" he asks, feigning innocence.

"Oh you know," she said with squinted eyes, "leave them alone!"

"No, please Jim," Dustin interrupts, "continue as you wish!" One stern look from Joyce cause Dustin to press his lips together, leaning his head to the side and closing his eyes in a pretend slumber.

A row back, Mike's rubbing the side of his head with a pink face while El looking at him with her teeth digging into her lower lip to hide her smile.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

He nods his head before whispering, "he's still scary."

With an amused smile breaking through, she grabs his hand that rests on his knee and lays her head on his shoulder, her tiredness from earlier this morning consuming her. Mike rests his head atop hers and closes his eyes, thinking about all of his favorite camping moments with Eleven and his friends.

Lucas is still sleeping against the window when a large pothole causes his head to ricochet off the hard glass surface.

"Fuck," he whispers, abruptly woken from his sleep.

He's about to move away when he feels the weight of Max's body on his arm, her head turned down onto his shoulder. He maneuvers himself onto the chair, now causing Max to wake up. Confused, she looks around before her face brightens at seeing her new boyfriend.

"Hi," she whispers, seeing as everyone else is sound asleep.

"Hey," he says quietly, "sorry, my head hit the window and I had to move so I don't get concussed."

Giggling, she nods, "yeah, that was probably a good idea." She stretches her arms up and turns her stiff neck side to side, "there's really no comfortable way to sleep in the car," she complains.

Assessing the row, Lucas sits up straight and pats his lap. She looks at him questioningly, knowing there's no way straining her head down would be any better.

"Lay down," he instructs, "and then just put your feet on Dustin, it's not like that idiot will wake up."

Giggling, she shrugs before laying her head on his legs, facing towards him, while her legs and feet curl up on Dustin. The curly-haired boy stirs for a second before moving his head to face the window.

"See," he says, "nothing." With a small laugh, she nods looking up at him, "thanks."

He boldly grabs her hand and places it between them, returning her soft smile, "no problem." One after the other, the couple's eyes close while their hands stay tightly clasped.

Hopper looks in his mirror three hours into the ride and to see everyone passed out, even the woman beside him. He'd never admit it to the teens, but this was one of the best weeks of his life. While it had less to do with them, he did still enjoy their company.

An hour and a half later when they're all at the Byers unpacking, since the majority of supplies belonged to them, he's thinking about retracting the second half of that statement.

"The lack of respect is truly absurd!" Dustin exclaims, "dirty shoes, dirty shoes on my lap, Max! Could you imagine waking up like that!"

The red-head lets out a groan, "oh my god they weren't dirty! And would you have preferred my bare feet!"

Fingers rubbing at his temples, Jim Hopper helps Joyce unpack the

last item from the trunk, and promises to call her later, before shouting "we're never doing a family vacation again!"

All of the teens stop shouting and turn their head to him in utter shock. He can't even take back what he's said before they're charging at him to envelop him with a hug,

"I knew you liked us!"